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REPORT #11



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# Coming of Age

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Reimagining the Response to  
Youth Homelessness in Canada

Stephen A. Gaetz

# Coming of Age

## Reimagining the Response to Youth Homelessness in Canada



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# About the Author

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Stephen Gaetz's research has focused on the economic strategies, health, education and legal and justice issues of people who are homeless, as well as solutions to homelessness from both Canadian and international perspectives. Dr. Gaetz is the Director of the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and the Homeless Hub, projects dedicated to mobilizing homelessness research to have a greater impact on policy, planning and service provision, thereby contributing to solutions to end homelessness in Canada. Prior to coming to York University, Dr. Gaetz worked in the youth homelessness sector for several years, both at Shout Clinic and Queen West Community Health Centre in Toronto. He also spent a short time with the City of Toronto in Community and Neighbourhood Services.

<http://edu.yorku.ca/edu-profiles/index.php?mid=112721>

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## About this Report

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The goal of the report, 'Coming of Age: Reimagining the Response to Youth Homelessness in Canada' is to present an argument for approaching how we respond to youth homelessness in a new way. The report achieves this by pulling together key information about youth homelessness, to better inform how we respond to the problem. As a peer-reviewed research document, Dr. Gaetz draws on an existing base of research in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States, in order to identify effective approaches to youth homelessness policy and practice. The report also draws heavily on several previous works by Dr. Gaetz, including "Live, Learn, Grow: Supporting Transitions to Adulthood for Homeless Youth—A Framework for the Foyer in Canada" (Gaetz & Scott, 2012) and several chapters from the book *Youth Homelessness in Canada: Implications for Policy and Practice* and in particular, the concluding chapter *Ending Youth Homelessness in Canada is Possible: The Role of Prevention* (Gaetz et al., 2013a).

While this is a research report that will appeal to academics, the intended audience is much broader. It has been written in a way to appeal to students, service providers, policy makers and the general public. The key arguments are intended to help inform decision-making in government, communities and social service agencies. As a research document, it provides an evidentiary base for creating more effective responses to youth homelessness. As a public document, it is intended to inspire change and innovation, with the ultimate goal of contributing to real and effective solutions to youth homelessness in Canada.

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# ON DEALING WITH A CRISIS

It is a truism that disasters require an emergency or crisis response. In August 2003, a major wildfire, fueled by high winds and drought near Kelowna, British Columbia, turned into a firestorm that quickly spread towards populated suburban areas, eventually forcing the evacuation of 27,000 residents. Eight years later, in 2011, another major wildfire devastated the community of Slave Lake, Alberta. The fire forced the complete evacuation of the town's 7,000 residents.

Both of these events were devastating for the communities' residents. They lost their homes, their possessions and their communities. In the face of both tragedies a rapid crisis response was quickly implemented. People displaced by the fire were relocated to other communities and provided temporary emergency shelter in motels, school gymnasiums, local hockey arenas and, in many cases, slept on cots or mats. They were given food, clothing and hygiene supplies. Plans were made to find them new housing and lessons were learned about how to prepare for and prevent, future disasters.

But, imagine for a second that the individuals and families in Kelowna or Slave Lake were still living in hockey arenas or motels all these years later. That would seem shocking and absurd and most of us would see this as the complete failure of our emergency response—that we really, really let these people down.

**So why, are we satisfied with an emergency response to youth homelessness that allows young people to languish in shelters for years at a time, entrenching them in street life keeping them from school and undermining their ability to move into adulthood in a healthy and fulfilling way? Some of us believe, without any evidence to back this up, that homeless youth choose the street life, or that they are delinquents. We do not hold the victims of fires to account and presume that because they chose to live in cities on the edges of forests that they are responsible for their predicament and that it is ok to keep them in shelters indefinitely.**

While emergency services will always be necessary, this should not be the basis of our response to youth homelessness. We need to refocus our efforts on preventing it from happening in the first place. For those who can no longer stay at home we must develop a crisis response that allows them to rapidly move into housing in a safe and planned way, with the supports they need to help them transition to a healthy and fulfilling adulthood.

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On the surface, youth homelessness seems to be an intractable problem. In many Canadian cities, the sight of young people panhandling or sleeping in parks may be unsettling, but by 2014 it probably doesn't shock most people. It seems that we have been dealing with this problem for a very long time; because of its persistence the solutions to youth homelessness can appear elusive.

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However, the reality is that youth homelessness, as a pervasive problem, is relatively new in Canada. Prior to the 1980s, while there was some level of homelessness, it was not considered to be a widespread and challenging predicament faced by large numbers of people (Hulchanski et al., 2009). In fact, we know quite well that key shifts in government policy (including the cancellation of our national housing strategy in 1993, as well as cutbacks to welfare and benefits in many jurisdictions) combined with a restructuring of the Canadian economy contributed to a rise in homelessness, including amongst youth populations (ibid.; Pomeroy, 2007; Moscovich, 1997; Chunn & Gavigan, 2004; Hulchanski, 2006). By the 1990s, the numbers of people experiencing homelessness began to increase quite dramatically in cities and towns across the country.

As the visibility of youth homelessness increased, there emerged a range of responses to the problem. On one hand, we began to see the proliferation of community-based services across Canada such as shelters, drop-ins and soup kitchens, designed to meet the needs of young people who found themselves without housing and family support. Many communities in Canada have developed innovative and responsive programs in this regard, reflecting the creativity and capacity of people to address a really challenging problem.

On the other hand, because homeless youth became a highly visible 'problem' that most certainly captured not only the attention of passersby, but also the media and politicians, a more punitive response simultaneously emerged (Parnaby, 2003; Esmonde, 2002; Hermer & Mosher, 2002). Responding to public complaints and the depiction of street youth by the news media and many politicians as delinquent or at best 'rebellious' and 'bratty', many communities responded to the emerging problem through more aggressive policing practices and laws, such as the Safe Streets Act, which target the money-making activities of people who are homeless and in particular, youth (Sommers et al., 2005; Kennelly, 2011; Bellot et al., 2005; 2008; 2011; Sylvestre, 2010a, b, Douglas, 2011; O'Grady et al., 2011; 2013).

When taken as a whole, our response to youth homelessness in Canada can be characterized as weak; it is non-strategic, lacking coordination and developed in an ad hoc manner. While some communities are making progress in this regard (Calgary, Kamloops, Kingston, for example), it is safe to say that most are not. By continuing to emphasize emergency supports—as important as they are—rather than prevention or rapid rehousing, our strategy is simply to manage the problem.

It is estimated that homeless youth make up about 20% of the population that uses emergency shelters in Canada (Government of Canada, 2012). This same study suggests that between 2005 and 2009, the numbers of people who are homeless who used shelters changed very little year in, year out. So, in spite of our best efforts and some excellent programs, the problem of youth homelessness continues to persist, leading many to question whether it can ever really be solved. Shelters remain full and we don't seem to be offering young people the kinds of solutions and supports they need. There is little evidence that the number of young people who become homeless and stay on the streets has diminished over the past ten or fifteen years, despite our best efforts.

**Instead of becoming complacent with the reality of youth homelessness, perhaps we need to reimagine our response to the issue.**

That is, it is time to shift from an approach that manages the problem, to an approach that ends youth homelessness. The good news is that we do not have to start from scratch. There is considerable knowledge to be drawn from research and innovations in Canada and international contexts that point the way. The purpose of this report is to highlight such innovation, to draw from research to outline a framework for addressing youth homelessness and to identify evidence-based practices that can be adapted to local contexts.

# Ending Youth Homelessness

## What do we mean when we say we can end youth homelessness?

Is it even possible? When making this assertion, we do not mean that there will never be people in crisis who need emergency/temporary housing. There will continue to be people who must leave home because of family conflict and violence, eviction or other emergencies, as well as those who simply face challenges in making the transition to independent living. Thus, there will always be a need for some form of emergency services.

Rather, ending youth homelessness means eliminating a broad social problem that traps young people in an ongoing state of homelessness. When young people come to depend on emergency services without access to permanent and age-appropriate housing and necessary supports, this leads to declining health and well-being and most certainly to an uncertain future. An alternative is to look at approaches that emphasize prevention and/or interventions that lead to appropriate housing options with supports.

Ending homelessness as a concept has gained traction internationally (Quilgars et al., 2011; FEANTSA, 2010; NAEH, 2002; USICH, 2009). This is also true in Canada, where many communities and key national and regional organizations have declared this not only a possibility, but a priority<sup>1</sup>. In calling for an end to homelessness, such communities have developed strategic plans that promise to do things differently. They are moving from managing homelessness to focusing on prevention and sustainable exits from homelessness.

Ending youth homelessness means eliminating a broad social problem that traps young people in an ongoing state of homelessness.



<sup>1</sup> This includes jurisdictions such as Calgary, Edmonton, Red Deer, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, Ottawa, Victoria, the province of Alberta, as well as organizations such as the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, etc.).

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## Ending Youth Homelessness

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In seeking to end youth homelessness, we should be focusing on developing integrated homelessness strategies with the goal of ensuring that no young person becomes homeless as a result of the transition to independent living. This report argues that such strategies should have the following components:

1. Develop a plan.
2. Create an integrated system response.
3. Facilitate active, strategic and coordinated engagement by all levels of government and interdepartmental collaboration.
4. Adopt a youth development orientation.
5. Incorporate research, data gathering and information sharing.

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A strategic response to youth homelessness does more than assist young people to become independent. By focusing on prevention and/or supported models of accommodation, the goal is to help young people make a successful transition to adulthood. In Canada, it is a widely held value that we should work to ensure all young people have the opportunity to be happy, productive and socially engaged adults. This should most certainly be the focus of our strategy for homeless youth.

So, how do we get here? In this report, we present a framework for ending youth homelessness. This framework articulates the necessity of developing integrated and strategic plans and service delivery models if we are to successfully address the problem of youth homelessness. Key to the framework is a detailed three-part model that incorporates prevention, emergency services, as well as accommodation and supports, as part of a comprehensive strategy to end youth homelessness. The aim is to not only provide a framework for change, but to inspire communities to do things differently by giving them concrete examples of ways forward. The solutions to youth homelessness articulated here can be adapted by communities across Canada and by all levels of government, provided there is a willingness to learn from others, to adapt and innovate and importantly, that there is commitment to change.

# The Evidence

In writing this report, the goal has been to pull together compelling evidence from academic research, as well as solid examples of policy and practice in Canada and elsewhere, to provide an evidentiary basis for the conceptual framework and practical examples of program design proposed here. To this end, we draw on the following sources of information.

**First**, Canadian and international research on youth homelessness helps identify both causes and potential solutions. This research has been particularly important in framing how to think about effective responses to youth homelessness. The recent book of research on the subject, “Youth Homelessness in Canada: Implications for Policy and Practice” (2013) has been particularly helpful in this regard.

**Second**, examples of innovation with regard to addressing youth homelessness in Canada are explored as a means of identifying what can be achieved. Knowledge of effective Canadian responses is drawn from reports and extensive conversations with service providers from across the country, as well as leaders of national, regional and local organizations working to address youth homelessness. Documentary evidence was also used to identify program strengths and innovation and for the purpose of selecting interesting case studies. The fact that there is very little rigorous evaluation research on homelessness interventions in Canada is definitely a limiting factor in making claims about program outcomes. Nevertheless, the case studies and profiles provide an important place to start. In reimagining our response to youth homelessness, we have a wealth of knowledge and inspiration from within our borders; we need to mine this knowledge further.

**Finally**, this report is informed by extensive investigations into international examples of systems level and program responses to youth homelessness from the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States. All of these countries have unique histories, government structures and policy frameworks, as well as different responses to youth homelessness. National strategies, policies and research reports, as well as program models, are examined here with an eye to how they might be adapted in the Canadian context. It is clear that relative to Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia have implemented much more strategic and integrated responses to youth homelessness. However, the evidentiary basis for the outcomes of these approaches (again, rigorous program evaluation) is not always extensive and one should also be reminded that a jurisdiction can move from being ‘progressive’ and innovative, to regressive very quickly (note the outcomes of austerity measures in the United Kingdom in recent years).

This review, then, reveals a wealth of evidence-based information regarding innovative and effective responses that can be used to develop a Canadian strategy aimed at preventing and ending youth homelessness. While this report offers critical commentary on the way Canada has historically responded to youth homelessness, much can be learned from our experience and applied to create real change in communities across the country.

## The Methodology:

The methodology for this report involved the following: First, a scoping literature review was conducted of academic literature on youth homelessness, focusing on Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia. The choice of these countries is due to the language limitations of the author, but also because a review of literature from these countries provides an opportunity to compare different program, agency and systems level responses. In conducting the scoping review, criteria was established to identify research that focused on: a) the causes and conditions of youth homelessness and b) interventions to address homelessness generally and youth homelessness in particular. This included research on program and agency level interventions, as well as program evaluations.

Both academic and grey literature research was examined. One of the key findings is that (in Canada in particular) there is very little evaluation literature on homelessness interventions—and in particular, those that impact youth—that provide even minimally sufficient evidence to consider such interventions to be ‘promising practices’, let alone ‘best practices’.

Second, policy documents that focused on responses to homelessness generally (and to youth homelessness in particular) in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States were collected, reviewed, compared and analyzed.

Third, qualitative interviews were conducted with policy makers, decision-makers and service providers in order to understand current thinking about how to address youth homelessness. In some cases these interviews were semi-structured, in other cases they were part of ongoing informal conversations about interventions and practices. These were conducted with individuals from a number of communities across Canada, including: Victoria, Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Winnipeg, Toronto, Hamilton, Niagara Region, Ottawa, York Region, Montreal, Halifax and St. John’s. Such interviews were also helpful in identifying innovative programming that could be shared as case studies.

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## The Structure of the Report

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The report is organized as a framework for ending homelessness, according to key themes necessary for planning and implementing such a strategy. In the section titled: “**About Youth Homelessness,**” it is argued that a targeted response must first and foremost begin with an understanding that the causes and conditions of youth homelessness are unique and distinct. Young people often become homeless with little or no experience with independent living. They may face barriers to obtaining housing or employment and in continuing with their education. Most significantly, adolescents and young adults are in the throes of physical, emotional, cognitive and social development; they are transitioning to adulthood. This shift occurs in a context of societal oppression based on gender, race and sexual orientation. This development, and the associated needs of young people who are homeless, must be addressed in any strategic response.

The next section, titled “**Developing a Strategy to End Youth Homelessness,**” focuses on the conceptual shift required if we are to move towards a strategy that will end youth homelessness. Here the case is made for a more integrated response to youth homelessness. Some Canadian jurisdictions are making important progress on that front (Alberta and Newfoundland, for instance) and many communities are moving towards more strategic, integrated approaches to addressing homelessness. Both Raising the Roof and the Canadian Housing Renewal Association have released policy statements that identify key components of effective strategies. Finally, much can be learned from international contexts. Australia and the United Kingdom, in particular, have made great progress in implementing national and regional strategies that shift the response from managing homelessness to focusing on prevention on the one hand and accommodation and supports on the other.

The following three sections provide a more detailed account of the proposed framework. First, the section on **Prevention** identifies a range of approaches to focusing on primary prevention, systems prevention and early intervention and their applicability in the Canadian context. This is followed by a discussion of how we build on the strengths of our **Emergency Services**, but also retool the sector so that it supports the priorities of prevention and rehousing. In the final section, different models of **Accommodation and Supports** are reviewed, ranging from transitional housing to Housing First approaches. Here it is argued that an effective accommodation strategy must go beyond bricks and mortar, to include a focus on income and employment, education, supports and youth engagement (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2013). In each of these cases, interesting examples from Canada and elsewhere in the world are used to illustrate how the framework can be applied.

In looking at the international context it becomes apparent that something interesting is happening; there is an emerging convergence of thinking about responding to youth homelessness. This alignment centers around two themes: first, that it is possible to prevent and end youth homelessness through strategic planning and service coordination and second, there is a need to reorient national, regional and local responses to homelessness away from a focus on emergency services (which may unnecessarily prolong the experience of homelessness) to one that emphasizes prevention and moving young people out of homelessness as quickly as possible.



Becoming homeless then does not just mean a loss of stable housing, but rather leaving a home in which they are embedded in relations of dependence, thus experiencing an interruption and potential rupture in social relations with parents and caregivers, family members, friends, neighbours and community.

## Developing a Response

Based on the Needs of Young People

Youth homelessness is distinct from adult homelessness, both in terms of its causes and consequences, but also in how we must consider and apply interventions. The place to begin a discussion of how to respond to the problem is to first explore the underlying features of the problem. In this section, a brief literature review of youth homelessness is provided; one that situates the problem within a broader understanding of adolescence and young adulthood in Canadian contemporary society.

The causes of youth homelessness are explored, with a focus on individual/relational factors, structural factors and the importance of understanding how systems failures contribute to the problem. All of this sets the stage for providing an operational definition of youth homelessness and a typology, which will be instrumental in considering what kinds of interventions are suitable and for whom they might be most effective.

## What We Know About Youth Homelessness

Youth homelessness is a serious issue in Canada. As described in the introduction to this report, homelessness grew from a troubling issue afflicting a small number of Canadians to a broader social and economic problem in the 1980s and 1990s. How extensive is youth homelessness in Canada today? In the State of Homelessness in Canada 2013 report, it is estimated that about 200,000 Canadians experience homelessness annually, and about 30,000 are homeless on any given night (Gaetz et al., 2013:22). A report by Segaert estimates that about 20% of the homeless population using shelters are unattached youth between the ages of 16-25, and a further 1% are under 16 (Segaert, 2012). This means that there are at least 35,000 young people who are homeless during the year, and perhaps 6000 on any given night.. It is important to note that this does not include young people who do not enter the shelter system, who are absolutely homeless and are sleeping out of doors or in other places unsuitable for human habitation, or those who are temporarily staying with friends and have no where else to live (couch surfers).

The youth homeless population is also diverse. There are typically more homeless male youth than females (Segaert reports that 63% of youth in shelters are male and 37% are female), which may be an outcome of the fact that young women are especially at risk of crime and violence (including sexual assault) while homeless, leading them to find alternatives to the streets, even if those alternatives pose other significant risks (Gaetz et al., 2010). Finally, certain significant sub-populations of youth are over-represented, including Aboriginal youth (Baskin, 2013) and in some cities like Toronto, black youth (Springer et al. 2013). Finally, youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, transsexual or queer (LGBTQ) make up 25-40% of the youth homeless population, compared to only 5-10% of the general population (Abramovich, 2013; Josephson & Wright, 2000).

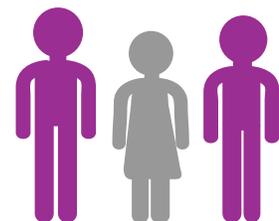
While the category of homeless youth is marked by incredible diversity, what unites this population is its youthful age and lack of experience of independent living. This is important to consider because any response to homelessness—if it is to be effective—must address the causes and the conditions of homelessness. While there are some commonalities that frame the experience of homelessness for young people and adults—lack of affordable housing, systems failures in health care and corrections, for instance—there are important differences, including physical, mental, social and emotional development. Homeless youth typically lack the experience and skills necessary to live independently and this is especially true for those under the age of 18. Moreover, the causes of youth homelessness are not necessarily the same as those that impact adults. Family conflict underlies youth homelessness; many are fleeing abuse or leaving the care of child welfare services.

Street youth, unlike homeless adults, leave homes defined by relationships (both social and economic) in which they were typically dependent upon adult caregivers. Becoming homeless then does not just mean a loss of stable housing, but rather leaving a home in which they are embedded in relations of dependence, thus experiencing an interruption and potential rupture in social relations with parents and caregivers, family members, friends, neighbours and community. For all of these reasons and more, a youth-based strategy—and the services that support this strategy—must be distinct from the adult sector.

The causes of youth homelessness are not necessarily the same as those that impact adults. Family conflict underlies youth homelessness and many are fleeing abuse or leaving the care of child welfare services.



**1 in 5**  
shelter users  
are youth



**2:1**  
male to female ratio  
in youth shelters



**25 - 40%**  
of youth experiencing  
homelessness self-identified  
as LGBTQ

→ What We Know About Youth Homelessness

In making the case that youth homelessness requires different remedies or solutions, it is important that we frame our understanding in terms of the developmental needs of adolescents and young adults. Theories of adolescent development highlight that, even in relatively stable environments, the transition from childhood to adulthood can be challenging (Tanner, 2009; Christie & Viner, 2005; Steinberg, 2007). The developmental tasks associated with becoming an adult are of course many and these occur against a backdrop of significant physical, cognitive, emotional or social maturation (Steinberg & Morris, 2001; Choudhury et al., 2006; Dorn & Biro, 2011).

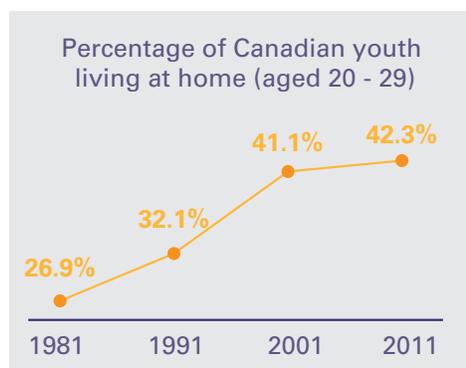
The gradual assumption of adult responsibilities and practices defines this transition. From the early teen years on, young people develop new capabilities and take on new responsibilities bit by bit over an extended period of time. It is well understood that successful transitions from childhood to adulthood require attention to nutrition, strong adult support (including mentoring), opportunities to experiment, take risks and explore (and make mistakes), learning to nurture healthy adult relationships (including sexual relationships) and the gradual acquisition of skills and competencies relating to living independently, obtaining a job, etc. Importantly, we also know that education is a central priority for youth. As a society we do what we can to help young people stay engaged with school as long as possible.

It's important to realize that these developments are overlaid with a complex web of cultural and legal proscriptions that allow certain kinds of autonomous decision-making and actions to occur. Typically these changes, which incrementally prepare youth for independent living, are supported by a significant amount of adult supervision and support both within the home and in the community. Historical, social and economic factors have an impact on when leaving home is desirable or even possible. Growing up in Canada is not the same today as it was twenty or thirty years ago. For instance, according to Statistics Canada, in 2011 42.3% of young adults (aged 20 to 29) "lived in the parental home, either because they never left it or because they returned home after living elsewhere." This compares to "32.1% in 1991 and 26.9% in 1981" (Statistics Canada, 2012a:2). The rise in credentialism necessitates staying in school longer. Additionally, the ability to obtain full employment with a living wage in a context of rising costs of accommodation impedes the ability of many young people to go out on their own in their late teens or early twenties. As part of the transition to adulthood, leaving home and achieving independence is a lot more challenging than it used to be.



Growing up in Canada is not the same today as it was twenty or thirty years ago.

**A lack of affordable housing & low incomes** have led more youth to stay home or return home



## Adolescence, Young Adulthood and the Experience of Homelessness

Losing one's housing, family and community, challenges traditional notions of adolescence. Rather than being granted the luxury of adjusting to adulthood and its responsibilities and challenges, over an extended period of time, street youth experience adolescence interrupted, wherein the process of transitioning to adulthood is truncated. That is, the space to learn, practice, take chances and assume responsibility is shortened as there is suddenly pressure to become independent and become responsible for one's well-being, exactly at a time when the young person in question may be suffering from the trauma of multiple losses.

Youth homelessness is defined by inherent instability, profound limitations and poverty. At a time when these young people are experiencing loss and potentially trauma, they are simultaneously charged with managing a diverse and complex set of tasks, including obtaining shelter, income and food, making good decisions and developing healthy relationships. Typically, young people who remain homeless for extended periods of time are also exposed to early sexual activity, exploitation, addictions and safety issues (Milburn et al. 2009; Saewyc et al., 2013; Gaetz, 2004; Gaetz et al., 2010) in a compressed time frame.

While young people who become homeless are thrust into adult roles at an accelerated rate, it is also true that homelessness simultaneously forecloses the opportunity to participate in many of the institutions that are designed to help them navigate the transition to adulthood. For instance, access to housing and employment may be very restricted for teens under the age of 18 (particularly those under 16) and in some jurisdictions such as Ontario, there are considerable barriers to accessing social assistance. This gives many young people little choice but to participate in the informal economy, often including illegal and quasi-legal activities such as drug dealing and the sex trade. Undermining the employability of homeless youth is the fact that few are able to remain in school. While the drop-out rate for young people in Canada is 8.5% (Statistics Canada, 2012), the rate for homeless youth is exponentially higher at 65% (Gaetz et al., 2010). This is an important consideration: high school drop-outs face a considerable disadvantage in the labour market and may face exposure to a life of poverty (Sum et al., 2009; Statistics Canada, 2010; 2012b; 2012c).

All of this suggests that for young people who become homeless, the challenge of moving from childhood to adulthood is not only truncated, but qualitatively different than is the case for most teenagers. Young people in this situation are typically denied access to the resources, supports and perhaps most significantly, the time that is expected and allowed for making this transition. They are therefore excluded from a process that is widely held to be crucial to human development, at a time when cultural, social and economic shifts are lengthening the period for which young people are dependent upon adult caregivers.

Rather than being granted the luxury of adjusting to adulthood and its responsibilities and challenges, over an extended period of time, street youth experience adolescence interrupted

While young people who become homeless are thrust into adult roles at an accelerated rate, it is also true that homelessness simultaneously forecloses the opportunity to participate in many of the institutions that are designed to help them navigate the transition to adulthood.

## The Causes of Youth Homelessness

So what exactly leads young people to become homeless in the first place? We actually know quite a bit about pathways into youth homelessness. While there are those who will insist that teenage runaways leave home in order to seek adventure, see the world and express their independence—and indeed, this may be true for a small minority of young people<sup>2</sup>—the research on street youth in Canada and elsewhere suggests that a range of other factors are much more significant. When we talk about pathways into youth homelessness, it is important to note, first, that there is a great diversity of factors that may contribute to a young person leaving home and second, that homelessness is rarely experienced as a single event and may be the end result of a process that involves multiple ruptures with family and community and numerous episodes of leaving, even if for short periods. The key causes of youth homelessness, then, include a) individual/relational factors, b) structural factors and c) institutional and systems failures.

<sup>2</sup> It is also acknowledged that there are a small number of young people who, though they may have experienced family conflict and violence, interpret their homelessness as more of a choice and/or a political act. However, this in part reflects how individuals interpret and make sense of their independence and of their desire to explore new opportunities. The experience of this minority of homeless youth cannot be generalized to the larger population, however.



**Diagram 1**  
The Causes of  
Youth Homelessness

# A

## Individual or Relational Factors

The research on youth homelessness is fairly consistent in identifying difficult family situations and conflict as the key underlying factors in youth homelessness (Karabanow, 2004; Karabanow & Naylor, 2013; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Braitstein et al., 2003; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Janus et al., 1995). There is extensive research in Canada and the United States that points to the fact that the majority of street youth come from homes where there were high levels of physical, sexual and emotional abuse, interpersonal violence and assault, parental neglect and exposure to domestic violence, etc. (Ballon et al., 2001; Gaetz et al., 2002; Karabanow, 2004; 2009; Rew et al., 2001; Thrane et al., 2006; Tyler & Bersani, 2008; Tyler et al., 2001; Whitbeck and Hoyt 1999; Van den Bree et al., 2009). In some cases, parental psychiatric disorders (Andres-Lemay et al., 2005) and addictions (McMorris et al., 2002) may be factors. It is also clear that childhood abuse, trauma and living in a constant state of fear, have long-lasting consequences for brain development, decision-making, the formation of attachments and positive social development (Baker-Collins, 2013; Anda et al., 2006; Sokolowski et al., 2013; McEwan & Sapolsky, 1995).

Strains within the family may also stem from the challenges young people themselves face. Personal substance use, mental health problems, learning disabilities, disengagement with the education system and dropping out, criminal behaviour and involvement in the justice system are key factors (Karabanow, 2004). The causes of these situations, however, are complex and may be difficult to disentangle from some of the stresses associated with parental behaviour identified above (Mallet et al., 2005). In other words, conflict with parents can result from a number of different stressors, including the inability of children and/or their parents to adequately cope with the challenges the other is facing.

# B

## Structural Factors

Structural factors are systemic and social conditions that extend beyond the individual and family situation, but which shape individual experiences and decisions both for young people and their parents. Poverty, under-employment and lack of housing stability also frame the experiences of young people and also can underlie stressors within the broader family that can lead to conflict. The lack of affordable housing in Canada, for instance, makes it incredibly difficult for young people with low incomes and who may be facing age-based discrimination to obtain reasonable accommodation. Lack of access to an adequate education can result in disengagement, low achievement and in the long run, difficulty obtaining meaningful employment that pays a living wage. In fact, low wages and under-employment directly undermine a young person's ability to live independently.

In addition, many young people who are homeless come from families defined by extreme poverty. This undermines the health and well-being of young people, impacts on their educational engagement and attainment and may lead to their leaving home at an earlier age because of the inability of their parents to support them.

Discrimination is also a key structural factor that contributes to homelessness. Aboriginal (First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples) (Belanger et al., 2012) and black youth are over-represented in the youth homeless population (Springer, et al., 2013). Homophobia is also implicated in youth homelessness, demonstrated by the clear overrepresentation of sexual minorities in the street youth population (Cochran et al., 2002; Gattis, 2009; Abramovich, 2013). Discrimination (exacerbated when combined with poverty) can contribute to school disengagement and failure, criminality and gang involvement. The ensuing conflicts with parents, community members and law enforcement officials can lead to homelessness (Springer et al. 2006; Sider, 2005; Fernandes, 2007).

## C

## Institutional & Systems Failures

Often young people become homeless and require resources from the homelessness sector because of failures in other systems of care and support, including child protection, health and mental health care and corrections. System failures in child welfare—including the fact that in many jurisdictions young people “age out” of care at 18<sup>3</sup>—means that for many young people the transition from child welfare support is not to self-sufficiency, but rather to homelessness (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Goldstein et al., 2012; Lemon Osterling & Hines, 2006; Lindsey & Ahmed, 1999; Nichols, 2013; Mallon, 1998; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006; Serge et al., 2002). So for many of these young people there is, then, no “home” to return to (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2004; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Gaetz, 2002; Gaetz et al., 2009; Karabanow, 2004; Lemon et al., 2006; Nichols, 2012; Raising the Roof, 2009; Serge et al., 2002).

More than half of young Canadians who are homeless have been in jail, a youth detention centre, or prison (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). Young people involved in juvenile justice or the adult system often leave prison without sufficient discharge planning and supports. In a sense, they are discharged from prison into homelessness.

Additionally, one needs to consider gaps in our health and mental health care systems. The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) estimates that between 10-20% of young people are affected by a mental health issue (CMHA website). The onset of some mental health issues, such as schizophrenia, typically begin when people are young and often as teens. Worse, only one in five young people who need mental health services receive them (CMHA website). Inadequate mental health supports for young people while at home, can potentially contribute to youth homelessness. Additionally, young people are often discharged from health care facilities with no home to go to. Once on the streets, the level of support is often worse because young people lack family support, financial support and the knowledge to navigate systems.

The causes of youth homelessness, then, have more to do with individual/relational factors, structural factors and systems failures, than with the decision to leave home because one does not like the rules. Those who run away for more frivolous reasons typically return home quickly; having to wear the same socks for a week, going hungry and a heightened likelihood of being a victim of crime, can make doing the dishes seem not so bad.

For most young people who become homeless, it is typically the complex intersection of a number of factors that leads them to leave home. However, an important thing to consider when discussing the causes of youth homelessness is that the factors described above also beset many, many young people who in the end do not become homeless. What is it that actually creates the conditions for homelessness? This is not well understood, but may include an event, the presence or absence of natural or informal resources, individual resilience or a chance decision by parents/caregivers or the young person. The key point is that there is a serendipitous aspect to youth homelessness that is necessary to acknowledge; our response to youth homelessness must take account of this (for instance, the need for prevention and early intervention).

Finally, it is important to understand that for many young people, becoming homeless is more of a process than an event. In some cases, a significant rupture can lead to long-term homelessness. In other cases, the pathway to the streets can be more gradual and episodic. That is, a young person may leave home for a short period and then return, only to experience the same stresses and pressures that will cause them to leave again.



**More than half of homeless youth have been in jail, a youth detention centre, or prison**

<sup>3</sup> The term “aging out” of care refers to the situation where once a young person reaches a certain age, they are no longer entitled to a particular service or support, regardless of need or circumstance.

## A Definition of Youth Homelessness

This discussion of adolescence, young adulthood and pathways into homelessness helps us in considering how to define youth homelessness and distinguish it from adult homelessness. A useful place to begin is with the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH)'s "Canadian Definition of Homelessness," which defines homelessness as:

"the situation of an individual or family without stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it. It is the result of systemic or societal barriers, a lack of affordable and appropriate housing, the individual/household's financial, mental, cognitive, behavioural or physical challenges and/or racism and discrimination. Most people do not choose to be homeless and the experience is generally negative, unpleasant, stressful and distressing."

(Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2012:1)

The Canadian Definition of Homelessness also proposes a typology that describes different degrees of homelessness and housing insecurity, including:

"1) **Unsheltered**, or absolutely homeless and living on the streets or in places not intended for human habitation; 2) **Emergency Sheltered**, including those staying in overnight shelters for people who are homeless, as well as shelters for those impacted by family violence; 3) **Provisionally Accommodated**, referring to those whose accommodation is temporary or lacks security of tenure and finally, 4) **At Risk of Homelessness**, referring to people who are not homeless, but whose current economic and/or housing situation is precarious or does not meet public health and safety standards."

(Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2012:1)

Youth homelessness is a sub-population of homelessness and refers to young people between the ages of 13 and 24 who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers and importantly, lack many of the social supports deemed necessary for the transition from childhood to adulthood.<sup>4</sup> In such circumstances, they do not have a stable or consistent residence or source of income, nor do they necessarily have adequate access to the support networks necessary to foster a safe and nurturing transition into the responsibilities of adulthood.

Age also matters when considering youth homelessness. Developmentally, there is a huge difference between the needs, circumstances and physical and emotional development of a 14 year old compared to an 18 year old or a 23 year old (though it must also be acknowledged that the factors that produce and sustain youth homelessness—including violence, trauma and abuse, may also contribute to developmental impairment for older youth). In addition to significant developmental differences, one must also consider the different statutory responsibilities associated with certain ages. Depending on the jurisdiction, the state will define the ages for which child protection services are responsible for care, what kinds of mental health supports are accessible and the age when one can live independently, obtain welfare and other government benefits, or leave school, etc.

**4** There is in fact great variation in terms of how youth homelessness is defined. This proposed age range is meant to create some definitional coherence and shared language for Canada, at the same time with an acknowledgement that it does not necessarily reflect specific program, policy and jurisdictional definitions. For instance, in Toronto, young people under the age of 16 are technically the responsibility of Child Protection Services when they show up at agencies serving homeless youth. In other provinces, the ages for accessing services may differ.

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## → A Definition of Youth Homelessness

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Additionally, one needs to consider the diversity of the youth homeless population, in terms of gender, sexual orientation and race. Much of the research on youth homelessness in Canada shows that males typically outnumber females 2:1 (O'Grady & Gaetz, 2004; 2009). In addition, some ethno-racial populations tend to be over represented—most significantly, Aboriginal youth (Baskin, 2007; 2013; Brown et al., 2007) and black youth (Springer et al., 2007; 2013)—while others are not. While there is a growing body of research on homelessness among immigrants and refugees, there is very little that focuses specifically on youth. We do know from research on adults, that new immigrant populations experience discrimination, difficulty accessing employment and linguistic barriers (Preston et al., 2011; Murdie et al., 2006). For people without status, the challenges of accessing services are particularly great. Finally, as suggested above, a significant percentage of homeless youth report being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, transsexual or queer (Cochran et al., 2002; Gattis, 2009; Abramovich, 2013).

These differences do matter and need to be considered when developing responses and interventions. The needs of young women on the streets are not the same as the needs of young men. Sexual minorities and racial minorities face discrimination that mainstream youth do not. Young mothers (Karabanow, 2013) and young people from new immigrant communities (Springer, 2013) face special challenges. A successful strategy needs to ensure that diverse needs are met.

## A Typology of Youth Homelessness

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One of the challenges of responding to youth homelessness is the differing needs and the acuity of challenges they face. For instance, what is the appropriate level of support for a young person who left home after a terrible argument with their parents—but for whom the relationship is redeemable—versus a young person who has been in foster care for years, has no connections to family and may be dealing with mental health issues or addictions? The evolution in our responses to adult homelessness has been built on a recognition of the necessity of taking account of the frequency and duration of homelessness (see Kuhn & Culhane, 1998). That is, there is a need to differentiate between those who experience short-term homelessness and never return to the streets from those who are more episodically homeless (moving back and forth) or those who become chronically homeless, because the circumstances and needs of young people in these situations may differ greatly.

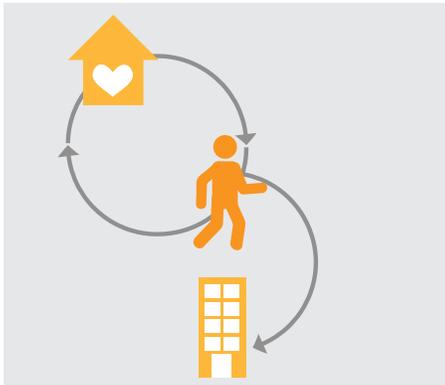
There have recently been efforts to define a typology of youth homelessness that captures key differences in terms of the factors that contribute to leaving home, as well as the level of supports that young people should be able to access to leave the streets. Toro et al., (2011) identified a number of factors that have been used to define different typologies of youth homelessness, including differences based on quality and extent of family relations, the reasons for becoming homeless, the history of abuse and neglect and mental health status, etc. These differences are important and need to be taken into account when creating a definition. Those who experience of deprivation, conflict and abuse as a child will likely have a profoundly different experience of homelessness than others and face additional challenges in transitioning to adulthood and well-being. The degree of family and community connectedness and support, on one hand, versus alienation and estrangement, on the other, also shapes the experience of homelessness and the strategies that need to be put in place to support young people.

The diverse backgrounds (NAEH) and experiences of homeless youth have led the National Alliance to End Homelessness to articulate a useful **typology of youth homelessness**<sup>5</sup> as part of their framework for ending youth homelessness. This typology addresses diversity in terms of the causes and experiences of homelessness and also helps map the duration and frequency of homelessness. This is important from the perspective of interventions, because it helps identify levels of need, existing informal supports and the risk of becoming chronically homeless.

<sup>5</sup> The NAEH typology draws from considerable research on frequency and duration of homelessness (see Kuhn & Culhane, 1998) and more recently, a review of typologies of youth homelessness put forward by Toro et al., 2011.

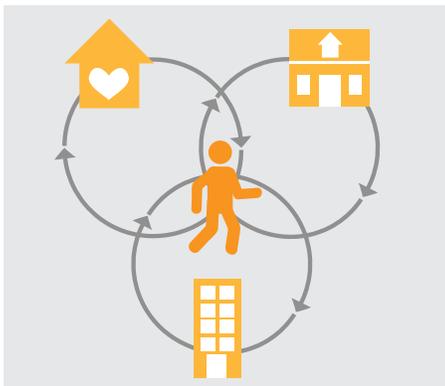
## → A Typology of Youth Homelessness

Below is an expanded presentation of the *NAEH* typology:



### Temporarily Disconnected

As Kuhn and Culhane (1998) point out, the vast majority of people who become homeless do so for a very short time, typically find their way out of homelessness with little assistance and rarely return to homelessness. This is as true for adults as it is for youth. The NAEH suggests that between 81 and 86 percent of homeless youth fit into this category (NAEH, 2012). This group is characterized as generally being younger, as having more stable or redeemable relations with family members, a less extensive history of homelessness and are more likely to remain in school. There is a strong need for prevention and early intervention to divert this population from the homelessness system.



### Unstably Connected

This population of homeless youth has a more complicated housing history and is likely to have longer and repeated episodes of homelessness (Toro et al., 2011). They are more likely to be disengaged from school and will have challenges in obtaining and maintaining employment. Most will have retained some level of connection with family members and are less likely to experience serious mental health or addictions issues than chronically homeless youth. This is a group for which family reconnection interventions, as well as transitional housing programs are recommended, particularly for youth under 18.



### Chronically Disconnected

In terms of numbers, this will be the smallest group of homeless youth, but at the same time the group with the most complex needs with the heaviest reliance on the resources in the youth homelessness sector. This group is defined by longer-term homelessness and a greater likelihood of repeated episodes. They will also be more likely to have mental health problems, addictions issues and/or a diagnosed disability. They will have the most unstable relations with families and in some cases there will be no connections at all. Young adults in this category may require more comprehensive interventions, as well as more supportive and longer-term housing programs.

**Communities can use this typology to understand, define and enumerate the shape and scope of youth homelessness in their area. It provides insight into the kinds of interventions needed to address youth homelessness, as one size definitely does not fit all.**

**Diagram 2**  
The NAEH Typology of  
Youth Homelessness

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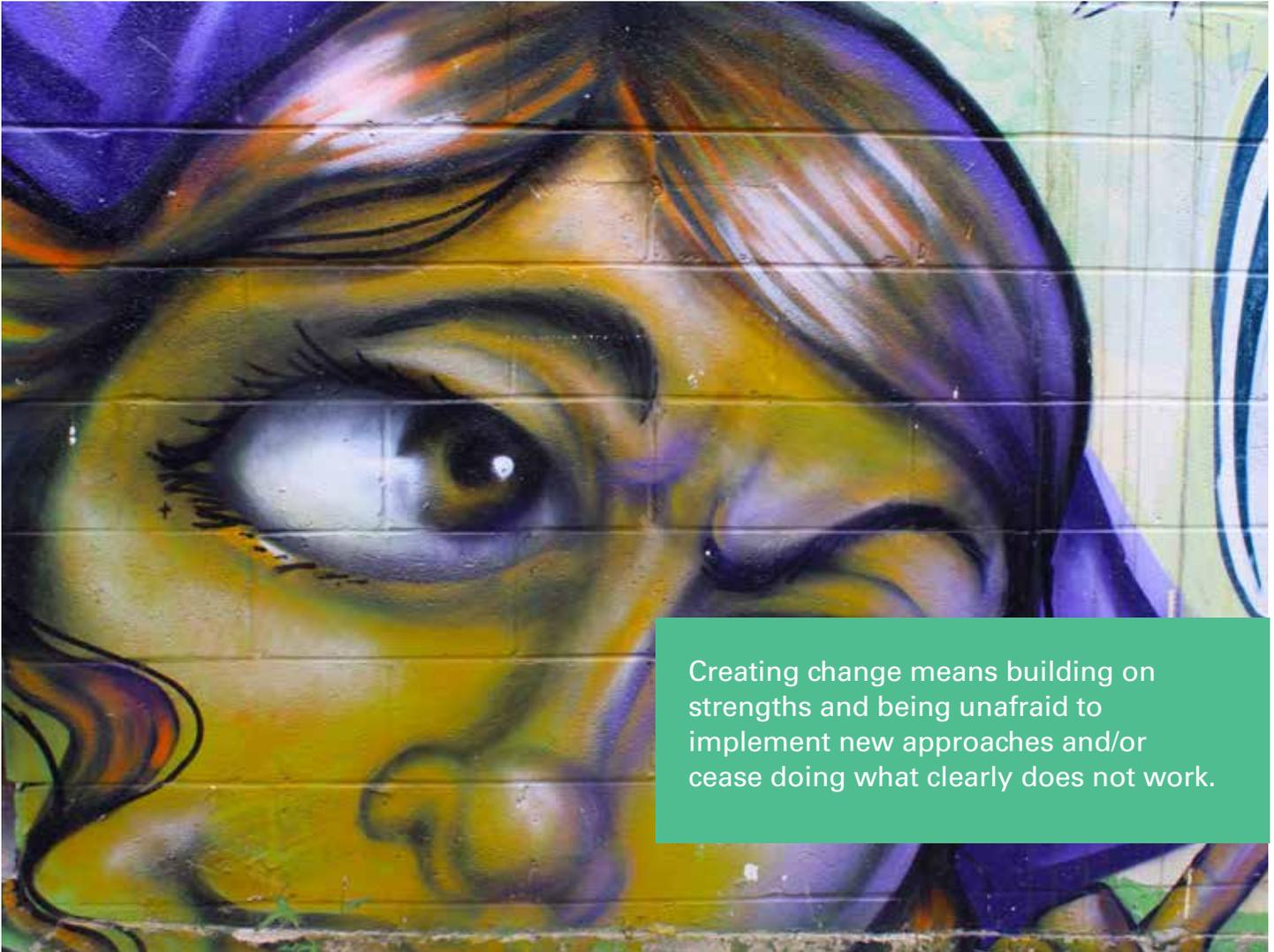
## Conclusion

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The definition and typology presented here provide us with clarity about who exactly homeless youth are and a common language for discussing the issue. The discussion of the causes of youth homelessness helps us develop effective interventions. The key message here, however, is that any successful response to youth homelessness must not simply model the adult response but must be embedded in an understanding of the needs of the developing adolescent and young adult. The goal of working with young people who are homeless is not merely to push them towards independence in a context where there are few jobs that provide a living wage (especially for drop-outs) and rental housing is expensive. The focus of the work should shift to providing young people with the supports they need so that they can transition to adulthood and eventually independence, in a much more safe and planned way.

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The goal of working with young people who are homeless is not merely to push them towards independence, but rather to support their transition to adulthood and well-being.



Creating change means building on strengths and being unafraid to implement new approaches and/or cease doing what clearly does not work.

The thought of ending youth homelessness can feel like an impossible task given the overwhelming scope of the problem and its apparent complexity. However, a lot is known about effectively responding to youth homelessness. A review of systems level and program responses to youth homelessness in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States reveals a wealth of innovative and effective programs, strategies and approaches that can be applied to the development of a Canadian strategy to end youth homelessness.

What becomes clear from this review is that the successful design and implementation of effective strategies are contingent upon partnerships between government, a wide network of disciplines, service and funding organizations, as well as different sectors, both public and private. All levels of government must support strategic initiatives to end youth homelessness. At the community level, the not-for-profit sector plays an important and indispensable role in implementing the plans and developing effective service models that meet the context-specific needs of young people.

## Responding to Youth Homelessness

Implementing a strategy to end youth homelessness invariably means doing things differently. This does not in any way mean starting from scratch, nor does it mean simply attempting to replicate what seems to work overseas. Narelle Clay<sup>6</sup> of Australia puts it this way:

“Don’t throw the baby out with the bath water. In an effort to do something different, in seeking innovation, don’t overlook the services and models that are effective. If you do this, the consequence will be a loss of community support and infrastructure that is invested in existing local services.”

(Clay, 2008)

Creating change means building on strengths and being unafraid to implement new approaches and/or cease doing what clearly does not work, or is counter-productive (the criminalization of homelessness is an example of the latter). Leadership and active participation by key stakeholders is of course essential to managing change. So, what is meant by restructuring and rebalancing our response to youth homelessness? Broadly speaking, there are three main approaches to addressing homelessness.

First, one can focus on **prevention**, which is to invest in supports and the coordination of services so as to reduce the likelihood that people will become homeless in the first place. In addressing youth homelessness, this means working ‘upstream’ to identify those at risk of homelessness and putting in place interventions that greatly reduce the risk that young people will become homelessness.

**Preventive strategies** can involve programming that strengthens protective factors amongst adolescents by enhancing engagement with school and building their problem-solving and conflict resolution skills. It also means stopping the flow of young people from institutional care (child protection, mental health, corrections) into homelessness. Finally and perhaps most importantly, it means designing and implementing effective early intervention strategies so that when young people become homeless (or are at imminent risk) they are given supports that either help them to return home or to move into new accommodation (with supports) in a safe and planned way.

The second approach, the **emergency response**, is the set of interventions available to someone once they become homeless. The goal here is to provide emergency supports in order to address basic and pressing needs for shelter and food, for instance, in order to lessen the immediate impact of homelessness on individuals and communities. Some communities have emergency shelters and supports designed specifically for youth, other places do not. The ‘emergency response’ can also include the use of law enforcement. This includes enactment of special laws to prohibit the activities of homeless people and/or more extensive use of enforcement measures such as regular stop and searches, ticketing and arrest (O’Grady et al., 2011).

The third response supports rapid **transitions out of homelessness** through the provision of appropriate **accommodation and supports**. The goal is to get people into housing and give them the supports needed (income, health care and other assistance, for instance) to ensure they do not fall back into homelessness. For young people, for whom staying with parents or caregivers is no longer an option, it means ensuring a planned and safe exit via appropriate accommodation and supports (if necessary).

A mature and developed response to homelessness ideally involves all three approaches, with a strong emphasis on prevention and strategies that move people quickly out of homelessness, supported by emergency services that bridge the gap.

<sup>6</sup> Narelle Clay is Chief Executive Officer of Southern Youth and Family Services <http://www.syfs.org.au/>

## → Responding to Youth Homelessness

While there are notable exceptions, few communities in Canada have taken this approach. Most have put their energy and resources into the emergency response; that is, providing a range of supports that merely manage people while they are homeless (Gaetz, 2008; 2010) (See Diagram 3). This typically results in a non-coordinated and ad-hoc patchwork of emergency services, such as shelters and day programs, that are concentrated mostly in downtown areas, that meet the immediate needs of young people who are homeless.



**Diagram 3**  
The Present Canadian Response to Youth Homelessness

While emergency services are important and necessary, we cannot rely on this as the ‘system’ if our goal is to end youth homelessness. In fact, it could be argued that as a society, we have become too comfortable with this approach, believing that our current emergency response is effectively dealing with the problem of homelessness.

*“In some cases, responses to homelessness have in fact become part of the problem. For example, hostels that were originally designed as temporary accommodation have become places where people stay long-term, serving to entrench homelessness. Hostels can fill up with longer-term service users and cease to fulfill their original function as temporary accommodation, meaning that more such accommodation has to be provided...”*

(FEANTSA, 2010:2)

Plenty of research attests to the limitations of responses that rely mainly on emergency services. First and foremost, keeping young people in a state of homelessness clearly compounds a range of problems not only for the homeless people themselves but also for society at large.

The damage to families and communities that results from youth homelessness is considerable. Second, the physical and mental health and well-being of young people who experience homelessness deteriorates and problems are exacerbated (Yonge Street Mission, 2009; Gaetz et al., 2010; MacKay, 2013). Additionally, young people who are homeless typically suffer from malnutrition even when they get their food from drop-ins and shelters (Tarasuk et al., 2009a,b; Tarasuk & Dachner, 2013; Dachner & Tarasuk, 2013; Gaetz et al., 2006).

By keeping young people in a state of homelessness, we make homelessness visible in communities across the country. This often leads citizens, the media and politicians to respond to this growing visibility by implementing either new laws (against panhandling, sleeping in parks, etc.) or aggressive policing involving ticketing, increased stop and searches and arrests. This is referred to as the ‘criminalization of homelessness’, which unfortunately often goes hand-in-hand with a robust emergency response (Sylvestre, 2010a; 2010b; Bellot et al., 2008; O’Grady et al., 2011; O’Grady et al., 2013).

# Rethinking the Canadian Response

That most communities in Canada have built their response to homelessness around emergency services should come as no surprise. A short overview of national responses to homelessness in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia reveals that when homelessness emerges as a ‘problem’, the first response is to develop emergency services. In time, there is usually a paradigm shift that leads to a greater emphasis on planned and coordinated responses that rebalance the approach to focus more on prevention and accommodation along with a retooling of the emergency sector to support these goals.

While Canada lacks a national strategy to end youth homelessness, much can be learned from the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States. A review of policy and research literature reveals more developed and strategic responses to homelessness. In each of these cases, all levels of government are engaged in the process of creating legislation, strategic plans and funding frameworks to address homelessness (and youth homelessness in particular). All three countries engage the non-profit and private sectors in their approaches and all have progressively developed systems aimed at reducing and eventually eliminating homelessness. It should also be noted that these countries have been dealing with homelessness as a major problem for a much longer time than Canada has.

The United Kingdom and Australia currently have the most sophisticated responses to youth homelessness, while the United States is rapidly moving towards adoption of a national strategy. In the UK, the most notable development has been the establishment of the National Youth Homelessness Scheme (NYHS), first announced in 2006 as a national strategy to ‘tackle and prevent homelessness’ (See Appendix A). The overarching goal is to have the national government work with local authorities to develop and implement interventions to support individual young people and their families so as to prevent homelessness and help youth transition to adulthood in a sustainable and safe way. The NYHS outlines the four key components of their framework:

- **Strategic planning & coordination**
- **Prevention**
- **Accommodation** (Direct access to housing & transitional housing)
- **Wider needs** (Supports)

While the National Youth Homelessness Scheme is undoubtedly impressive and ambitious in its conception and scope, one word of caution. Nations, institutions and programs can quickly move from progress and innovation to stagnation and regression. The extensive resources to support the NYHS are now no longer available and in the context of the austerity measures invoked by the current Conservative government in the UK, the future of the program is uncertain.

In Australia, the national government began to tackle youth homelessness in a serious and sustained way in the 1980s (MacKenzie & Chamberlain, 1995; 2006). The first of several main policy initiatives was the establishment of the **Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP)** of 1985, which also included a Youth SAAP component. This was followed by other legislative changes over the years<sup>7</sup>, as well as innovations in service delivery. Australian states (equivalent to Canadian provinces) have also developed strategic responses to youth homelessness and have been major innovators in program planning and design.

- 7** Examples include:
- Youth Social Justice Package for Young Australians (1989),
  - Innovative Health Services for Homeless Youth (IHSHY) (1989),
  - Job Placement, Employment and Training Program (JPET) (1992)
  - Reconnect program (1999)

In developing **The Road Home** (Australia’s strategy to end homelessness, (Australian Government, 2008a), the **National Youth Commission Inquiry into Youth Homelessness** (est. 1987) reviewed Australia’s response to youth homelessness

## → Rethinking the Canadian Response

with the goal of pulling together various program strands into a coherent national strategy that addresses youth homelessness (National Youth Commission, 2008). The report provides a “Roadmap for Youth Homelessness” and highlights ten strategic action areas (See Appendix B), which emphasize the need to develop and implement a national framework for action on homelessness, increase the supply of affordable and supported housing for youth in communities across the country, strengthen the emphasis on prevention, early intervention, service integration and child welfare reform, as well as ensure that young people have ongoing supports (after they leave the system, if they need it).

The United States is also moving rapidly in this direction, since the launch of the Federal Government’s Ten Year Plan to end homelessness, “**Opening Doors**” (USICH, 2010). In 2012 they released an amendment to the plan that specifically addressed strategies to address children and unaccompanied youth homelessness, around the same time that the National Alliance to End Homelessness released its typology of youth homelessness. Finally, in 2013, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) launched its Framework to End Youth Homelessness, identifying four core outcomes for youth:

- Stable Housing
- Permanent Connections
- Education or Employment
- Social-emotional well-being

Designed to help coordinate federal, state and community efforts to address youth homelessness, the framework focuses on two complementary strategies, including a data strategy and a capacity strategy. More details regarding the Framework to End Youth Homelessness can be found in Appendix C.

While much can be learned from these international examples, one has to exercise a degree of caution when thinking about the transferability of such approaches. The policy context is significantly different (not to mention our model of federalism in Canada) and one must be wary of the potential for ‘smoke and mirrors’; presentations of effective responses often highlight policy and program strengths and downplay weaknesses, gaps and other challenges.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that the conceptual framing of such strategies can help us reimagine a Canadian response to youth homelessness. Elements of these policy frameworks can be adapted and applied here, as well as important innovations in program and service delivery. There is a real opportunity to build on the successful programs and services for homeless youth that exist in Canada, as on the momentum from strategic and integrated responses to youth homelessness that are developing across the country.

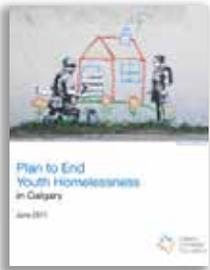
In particular, one can look at the Calgary Homeless Foundation’s Plan to End Youth Homelessness in Calgary, as well as the Government of Alberta’s emerging approach to strategic coordination and service integration to address youth homelessness. Recently, the Mobilizing Local Capacity (MLC) project has taken the lead on supporting smaller communities across Canada in developing and implementing community plans to address youth homelessness. A partnership between the Catherine Donnelly Foundation, Eva’s Initiatives and the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association, the MLC project is encouraging communities to adopt a systems approach, to develop a strong community engagement strategy and draw on evidence-based practice in formulating plans. To date, four communities (including Kingston, Ontario; Kamloops British Columbia; Saint John, New Brunswick and Wellington City, Ontario, have been supported to develop plans. All of this suggests there is momentum in many communities to support more integrated, planned responses to youth homelessness and that there exists a clear thirst for change.



There is a real opportunity to build on the successful programs and services for homeless youth that exist in Canada.

# Plans to End Homelessness

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## Plan to End Youth Homelessness in Calgary

Calgary Homeless Foundation

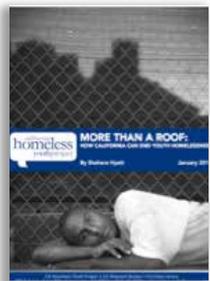
Canada  
June, 2011



## Comprehensive Plan to Prevent and End Youth and Young Adult Homelessness in King County by 2020

Homeless Youth and Young Adult initiative

King County (Seattle) Washington, USA  
August, 2013



## More Than a Roof: How California Can End Youth Homelessness

California Homeless Youth Project

California, USA  
January, 2013



## Plan to End Youth Homelessness in Calgary

Calgary Homeless Foundation

Canada  
June, 2011

## Turning the Curve

### Developing Effective Strategies to End Youth Homelessness

The longer we allow young people to remain homeless, the worse their problems become and the greater their challenges in moving off the street.

We now know that the longer we allow young people to remain homeless, the worse their problems become and the greater their challenges in moving off the street (O’Grady et al., 2011; Yonge Street Mission, 2009). We need to really ask whether keeping young people in a “state of emergency” means we are really helping them? Is it enough to treat the symptoms while ignoring the causes?

Effective strategic responses attempt to reduce a problem, rather than simply manage it. In moving towards a more strategic and coordinated response to youth homelessness in Canada, a shift from emergency services (which may unnecessarily prolong the experience of homelessness) to prevention and accommodation (with necessary and appropriate supports) must be a priority. But what does that look like? What is involved in that shift? How do we get there?

The framework presented here draws from what has been learned from effective responses about the structural factors that need to be addressed, as well as the systems that need to be in place in order to implement an effective strategy to end youth homelessness. The proposed framework for ending youth homelessness outlines key components that can be implemented at the national, provincial or community levels that will help shift the emphasis from managing youth homelessness, to one that focuses on prevention and rehousing. Guiding the proposed framework is the principle that a strategic response to youth homelessness must not only reflect an understanding of the causes and circumstances of youth homelessness, but must include specific strategies that address this understanding.

A review of strategic responses to youth homelessness identifies several core components of an effective framework. This includes:

1. **Develop** a plan
2. **Create** an integrated system response
3. **Facilitate** active, strategic and coordinated engagement by all levels of government and interdepartmental collaboration
4. **Adopt** a youth development orientation
5. **Incorporate** research, data gathering and information sharing

In conclusion, this will mean making a major shift from managing youth homelessness through the provision of emergency services, to rehousing young people. The goal is not simply to help move them to independence, but rather, to enable a successful and supported transition to adulthood and well-being.

## Core Components of an Effective Framework

### 1. Develop a Plan

The first step is devising and implementing a plan or strategy, one that is inclusive in its process, strategic in its objectives, sets real and measurable targets for change, is clear to all stakeholders and leads to real changes in young people's lives. By design, it engages the necessary players from the community, all levels of government and the non-profit and private sectors to work towards real reductions in homelessness. The success of the plan depends on collaboration among a wide range of stakeholders including funders, governments, service providers (mainstream as well as homeless-serving organizations) and people affected by homelessness.

Countries with comprehensive and integrated responses to youth homelessness—such as Australia and the United Kingdom—have national plans that set out clear strategic priorities and roles for all levels of government, communities and the non-profit and private sectors (Minnery & Greenhalgh, 2007; Parliament of the United Kingdom, 1996; 2002a,b,c; Communities and Local Government, 2005; Australian Government, 2008a,b; USICH, 2010a). The “10 Year Plan” approach, which originated in the United States with the National Alliance to End Homelessness (2002) and has since been adopted by the US Government (2009), has been adapted and applied in over ten Canadian communities, including most cities in Alberta and is now being mandated to be adopted by communities in Ontario. This approach has proven to be successful as a means of coordinating resources at the national, regional and local levels.

“Ten Year Plans are a challenge to the status quo and will not be without controversy, detractors and difficult conversations. Don't expect a smooth ride! Your planning process should anticipate some conflict, so ensure your planning committee has a measure of independence, a balance of perspectives, a focus on action and results, an agreed upon process and, importantly, a deadline.”

#### A Plan Not A Dream

Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness

The Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness' **A Plan Not A Dream** (2012) outlines the key elements of a successful community plan to end homelessness; these ideas can easily be incorporated into a youth-focused plan:

- A** Must be evidence-based.
- B** Must have measurable and ambitious outcomes and key milestones.
- C** Is a learning, living and adaptive document.
- D** Covers the 10 Essentials, including:
  1. Planning
  2. Data, research and best practice
  3. Coordinated system of care
  4. Income
  5. Emergency prevention
  6. Systems prevention
  7. Housing-focused outreach
  8. Rapid re-housing
  9. Housing support services
  10. Permanent housing
- E** Is the product of an inclusive community process that engages key players in the local homeless system, including people with lived experience.

Any plan to end youth homelessness should include a statement of guiding principles and core values, for these shape how one responds to the needs of young people. As with the Ten Year Plan model, an effective youth homelessness strategy must also have clearly articulated goals and objectives, timelines, responsibilities and benchmarks, as well as measurable targets. The right players must be engaged in the development and implementation of the plan and importantly, young people must be involved in planning, delivery and evaluation, as their voices must be included in any quality assurance system.

## → Core Components of an Effective Framework

### 2. Create an Integrated Systems Response

In any community there may be a range of public, non-profit and charitable programs and systems and services that serve low-income and homeless individuals and families. In large communities there may be dozens of such services. Together these programs are usually a patchwork emergency response that is not effectively coordinated into a system of care designed to end homelessness. The homeless services may not effectively work together or even with reference to each other. This is important to consider. A loose collection of non-coordinated emergency services that do not share similar goals and objectives will not lead to effective results.

The move towards a strategic response to youth homelessness requires an integration of services both within the homelessness sector, but just as importantly, between the sector and mainstream social, educational and health services. As opposed to a fragmented collection of services, an integrated systems response requires that programs, services and service delivery systems are organized at every level—from policy, to intake, to service provision, to client flow—based on the needs of the young person. Integrated service models are typically client-focused and driven and are designed to ensure that needs are met in a timely and respectful way.

This is referred to as a **“System of Care”** approach. Originating in children’s mental health and addictions sectors, the concept can be defined as: “an adaptive network of structures, processes and relationships grounded in system of care values and principles that provides children and youth with serious emotional disturbance and their families with access to and availability of necessary services and supports across administrative and funding jurisdictions” (Hodges et al., 2006:3).

‘Systems of care’ have been adopted in some US and Canadian communities that support strategic and planned approaches to ending homelessness. The Calgary Homeless Foundation has implemented this model<sup>8</sup> as part of its Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness. Through this approach, they have coordinated a broad array of services and supports, wherein different service providers have defined roles in relation to other providers. Through a supportive policy infrastructure, the system integrates service planning, coordination and management at the sector, agency and program levels.

Ultimately, then, when an individual or family becomes homeless and ‘touches’ the system they are immediately assessed, their needs are identified and plans are put in place. All of this is done with a client-centered focus, so that they are in charge of determining their needs and where they need to go. As they move through the sector, different agencies work collaboratively to help meet those needs and move them out of homelessness as quickly as possible. All of this points to the need for effective data management and information sharing systems, so that one becomes a client of the system, not just an agency.

In an uncoordinated and fragmented system, individuals and families can get lost as services focus on meeting immediate needs only. A coordinated system responds to client needs, ensuring services are there when they need them and that they do not get lost in the maze.

An effective plan to end youth homelessness must, then, include the development and implementation of a systems approach. Services within the homelessness sector need to be coordinated and integrated, so that different agencies, and programs have clear roles and mandates in order to work together as providers for the same clients. The systems coordination has to work beyond the homelessness sector as well, to include mainstream services, such as health care, supports for those with addictions and mental health challenges, housing services, child welfare and corrections which all must be part of the homeless sector’s coordinated system of care. **The community-based services of the homelessness sector cannot alone solve homelessness.**

<sup>8</sup> For information on the Calgary Homeless Foundation’s System of Care approach, go to: <http://calgaryhomeless.com/what-we-do/system-planning/>

# Street Youth Planning Collaborative (SYPC)

Hamilton, Ontario



One of the best Canadian examples of an integrated service response to youth homelessness can be found in Hamilton, Ontario. In this case, the range of street youth serving agencies in the city actively collaborate to ensure that the needs of young people who become homeless are met through collective planning, integrated service delivery and a desire to ensure young people's needs are appropriately met by a seamless and comprehensive range of services.

The integrated model has been supported by the Street Youth Planning Collaborative (which is funded by the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton), which since 2002 has been working with agencies in the area to design and implement an integrated strategy.

The SYPC is in fact a multi-layered committee that includes the directors of street youth serving agencies, front line DCA staff and young people who have experienced homelessness. The key agencies include Alternatives for Youth, Good Shepherd Youth Services, Hamilton Regional Indian Centre, Living Rock Ministries and Wesley Youth Services. They work in a collaborative fashion and work to avoid competition, with the focus being on meeting the needs of young people. The underlying philosophy of the SYPC is to support healthy adolescent transitions to adulthood, rather than merely rush young people to independence.

**“Together, we aim to provide effective responses and solutions that can assist youth to overcome the issues and barriers that they experience and transition away from street-involvement and homelessness. In our work together, we have contributed to the development of a continuum of coordinated services and we have built a comprehensive range of supports that addresses the following areas: outreach, prevention and early intervention, basic needs, mental health, physical health, education, employment, social and recreational, young parenting, housing and diversity and inclusion.”**

*(Street Youth Planning Collaborative, ND)*

The SYPC model demonstrates how an integrated service delivery model necessarily requires: a) a coordinating body, b) a spirit of collaboration (not competition) between participating services and c) a systems design that considers the needs of young people and the flow of clients through the maze of services, d) the importance of different voices at the planning table, including managers, front line staff and importantly, young people who have experienced homelessness.

→ Core Components of an Effective Framework

### 3. Facilitate Active, Strategic, Coordinated Engagement by all Levels of Government and Interdepartmental Collaboration

In countries that are showing success, there is recognition that partnerships are key to ending homelessness. This requires that all levels of government (including Aboriginal governments) be at the table and engaged in the strategic responses. Communities cannot necessarily address all of the factors involved (health and mental health, child protection, corrections, affordable housing supply etc.) without the direct engagement of higher levels of government. All of this enables the non-profit and private sectors to make a contribution to ending homelessness as well.

Within government, interdepartmental collaboration and responsibility must be seen as part of the solution. Homelessness is a “fusion” policy issue. It must necessarily involve health, corrections and justice, housing, education and child welfare, for instance. This may seem obvious but it is one of the biggest challenges in dealing with the issue of homelessness. Successful plans to end homelessness in the US, Australia and the UK demonstrate that strategic responses must bring other government sectors to the table and that these sectors must be mandated (through legislation) to address the flow of people into homelessness. In Canada, the Government of Alberta incorporates intergovernmental responsibility as a necessary feature of its coordinated response to homelessness.



**Diagram 4**  
Youth Homelessness as a “Fusion Policy” issue.

As long as homeless shelters are paid on a per-diem basis and program outputs are based on the number of clients who use the service, such services are rewarded for keeping people homeless, as opposed to helping them move out of homelessness.

Finally, it is essential that governments create a policy and funding framework that allows such change to happen. A great plan means nothing if adequate resources are not made available or if funding practices do not support and enable change. The shift cannot happen if existing homelessness services are asked to do more without additional funding, or are expected to carry the full responsibility for creating change, when many of the key drivers of change (whether this be funders, or the role of mainstream services) lie outside of the sector. For instance, as long as homeless shelters are paid on a per-diem basis and program outputs are based on the number of clients who use the service, such services are rewarded for keeping people homeless, as opposed to helping them move out of homelessness.

## → Core Components of an Effective Framework

### 4. Adopt a Youth Development Orientation

While some elements of an adult homelessness strategy can be adapted to address youth homelessness, there are key considerations specific to youth that must be acknowledged. As argued in Section 2 of this report, the causes of youth homelessness are distinct from those of adults and therefore the solutions must be as well.

Issues relating to adolescent development, for instance, must be considered in any approach. Homeless youth—especially those under the age of 18—typically lack the experience and skills necessary to live independently. Just as importantly, many homeless youth will be in the midst of important physical, psychological and emotional development. Unfortunately, when young people become homeless or are in crisis, many of the assumptions about what is important in adolescent development are abandoned in the rush to make them self-sufficient.

We need to build youth homelessness strategies that prioritize healthy adolescent development and shift the goal of the work from a transition to independence, to a successful transition to adulthood and well-being. A comprehensive approach to youth homelessness focuses on more than simply meeting instrumental needs and should include service components that focus on:

- Stable housing
- Income
- Education and training
- Necessary supports, when applicable (health, mental health, addictions)
- Life skills
- Engagement in meaningful activities
- Healthy and meaningful relationships (including family and friends)

Services for homeless youth are targeted at a diverse population. The age range of services (13-24) means that service provision must necessarily span great developmental differences amongst the youth population. The presenting issues and needs of a 13 year old are different from those of a 16 year old, or a 20 year old.

In addition, there is the need to take account of diversity. The needs of young women on the streets are not the same as the needs of young men. Sexual minorities and racial minorities face discrimination that mainstream youth do not. Young people from new immigrant communities face special challenges. A successful strategy needs to ensure that diverse needs are met. One size does not fit all.

Finally, a successful strategy should provide different interventions and supports for young people based on need. The NAEH typology that defines homeless youth in terms of “temporarily disconnected,” “unstably connected” and “chronically disconnected” articulates important differences that require varying responses.

The ultimate goal of any strategy to address youth homelessness is not merely to support young people in their transition to independence, but rather, to support their transition to a healthy and meaningful adulthood.



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 → Core Components of an Effective Framework
 

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## 5. Incorporate Research, Data Gathering and Information Storage

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It should go without saying that research and evidence ought to influence any significant social or economic problem in society. Compared to Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia have historically had a much stronger commitment to the use of research and data as part of their strategic responses to homelessness. However, things are rapidly changing. In communities that have the most successful response to homelessness, there is a growing respect for the role of research, evidence and data management. Research can impact the solutions to homelessness by providing a deeper understanding of the problem, strong evidence for solutions and good ideas from other countries that can be replicated and adapted locally. Research should be part of any strategic solution to youth homelessness and should include the following elements:

- A Information and data management.** System-wide data collection and sharing across sectors must be in place to support an outcomes-based approach to addressing homelessness. This is extremely important, since progress cannot be measured without it.
- B Basic research** on the causes, lived experience and solutions makes for better policy and practice.
- C Program Evaluation.** Instituting a culture of evaluation in the sector (and providing funding) is important to demonstrate the effectiveness of strategies and practices. This supports the drive for ‘continuous improvement’, the measurement of progress, more effective planning and also becomes a means to identify effective models and practices.
- D Knowledge Mobilization.** Communities should be supported to develop mechanisms and strategies to identify effective practices and enable the sharing of them both within and between countries.

Integrated data management systems are seen as essential to supporting systems approaches. In the United States and some Canadian communities such as Calgary, **Homelessness Management Information Systems (HMIS)** have been developed for the homelessness sector that enable the coordination of services, tracking of clients and measuring of impact of service delivery models. In Canada, a new updated version of **Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS)** has been rolled out that has many of the same capabilities for supporting service integration. It is designed to “enhance services providers’ ability to manage their operations and collect information about the population using shelters, such as: client bookings, provision of goods and services, housing placement and case management and will be made available for free” (Government of Canada, 2013).

## Conclusion

### Making the Shift from Managing Youth Homelessness, to Prevention and Rehousing.

A key underlying theme of this report is that we can end youth homelessness, with good ideas, the right framework and proper commitment from key players. The framework presented in the following sections suggest a new orientation to addressing youth homelessness that retains the three main components—prevention—emergency services—accommodation and supports, but shifts the emphasis. Prevention and accommodation (with supports) become a greater priority, while emergency services are retooled to facilitate this shift.



**Diagram 5**  
Shifting the emphasis to prevention and rehousing

It is important to remember that the three main components are not discrete and separate areas of activity. There is considerable overlap between the components and all three must be properly integrated into a coordinated and strategic response.

The following sections explore the different elements of prevention, emergency services and accommodation and supports. In each case, a conceptual framework is presented, with concrete examples to illustrate the application of each element.

## What do we Know and What can we Do?

Preventing youth homelessness means stopping young people from becoming homeless in the first place. While it is safe to say that many Canadians now ‘get’ the idea that homelessness prevention is a good idea, it is often harder to pin down exactly what this means or what it looks like. In this section, we present a framework for preventing youth homelessness that looks at three key areas of activity. The first is **primary prevention**, which focuses on working upstream to address factors that increase the risk of youth homelessness and which can support enhancing protective factors that increase resilience. Key here is the importance of working with families and getting into schools. Second, there is a need for **systems prevention**, so we can stop the flow of young people from mental health care, child protection and corrections into homelessness. Third is a set of **early intervention** strategies designed to support young people and their families when they are imminently at risk of becoming, or have just become, homeless. For each part of the prevention framework, useful examples of programs and strategies are used to illustrate how this can be done and to provide examples that can be adapted in other contexts.

Primary Prevention

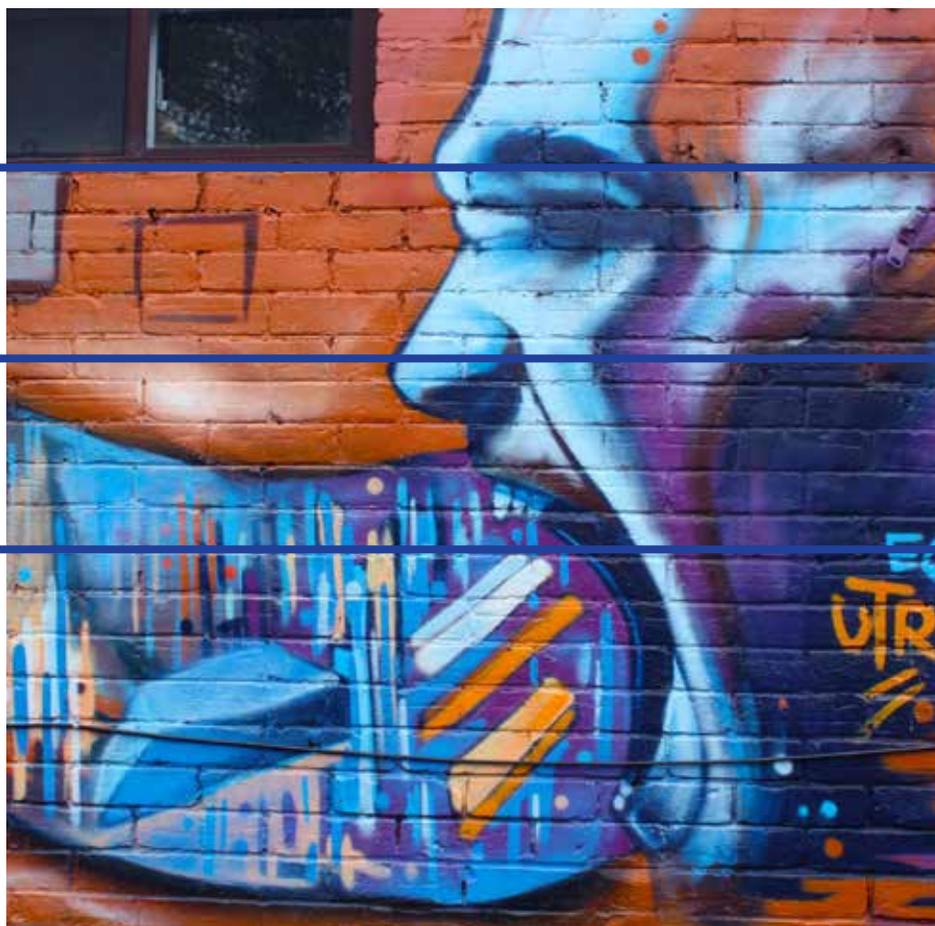
Page 34

Systems Prevention

Page 40

Early Intervention

Page 45



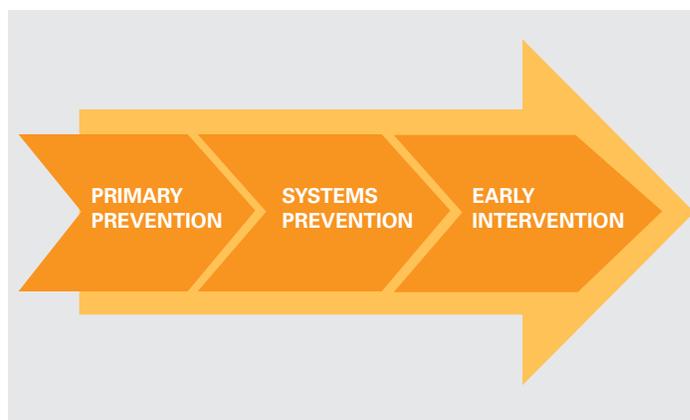
## A Framework for Prevention

The most successful and strategic approaches to youth homelessness invest heavily in prevention. Both the UK and Australia have a strong focus on prevention. As this is a central theme (and paradigm shift) in the US government's new plan to end homelessness, this will also likely be a key feature of their plan to end youth homelessness. In all cases, a strong prevention approach requires a coordinated and strategic systems approach and must necessarily engage, include and mandate action from mainstream systems and departments of government, as well as the homelessness sector. No solution to end youth homelessness can or should depend only on the efforts of those in the homelessness sector.

Lest we think that we will forever be behind other nations in this regard, it is important to note that the adoption of prevention frameworks in the US, UK and Australia all began with a recognition that things need to change. The evolution and conceptual framing of prevention-based approaches is built upon experimentation, innovation and research and was underpinned by important legislative and policy shifts. In the UK, Hal Pawson has written extensively on the meaning of prevention and the roles and responsibilities of different sectors in implementing a successful strategy (Pawson, 2007; Pawson et al., 2006; 2007). Legislation such as the Homelessness Act (Parliament of the United Kingdom, 2002) and the Children's Act (Parliament of the United Kingdom, 2004) also emphasized the need for a prevention focus. Evaluative studies of youth homelessness prevention programs, such as the 'Safe in the City' program, offered evidence-based insights into what works (Dickens & Woodfield, 2004). Quilgars' extensive research adds additional conceptual knowledge about how to think about preventing youth homelessness, as well as an evidence base that identifies and highlights program effectiveness (Quilgars et al., 2008; 2011). In Australia, MacKenzie and Chamberlain (2004; 2006; National Youth Commission, 2008) played a major role in articulating the importance of family connections and mediation, early intervention and the role of schools. The extensive program development and evaluation of Australia's 'Reconnect' program (see box page 60) also made a major contribution to the understanding of the prevention of youth homelessness and the role of schools (Evans & Shaver, 2001; Ryan & Beauchamp, 2003). In the US, Culhane et al., (2010) have written a seminal document for the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness outlining the meaning of homelessness prevention, as well as the challenges to program implementation and outcomes measurement. These resources are influential in shaping strategic responses and help point the way to how we might think about preventing youth homelessness in Canada.

Homelessness prevention approaches are typically based on a public health paradigm, which looks at three levels of preventive interventions: primary, secondary and tertiary (Shinn et al., 2001; Burt et al., 2006; Culhane et al., 2010). The goal of primary prevention is to 'work upstream' to reduce risks and typically involves universal interventions directed at whole communities, as well as targeted interventions for 'at risk' communities. With regards to homelessness, this could include information campaigns and educational programs, as well as strategic interventions designed to help address problems that may eventually contribute to homelessness, well before they arise. Secondary prevention is intended to identify and address a problem or condition at an early stage. In thinking about homelessness, this typically means strategies that target people who are clearly at risk of becoming, or who have recently become, homeless. Tertiary prevention is intended to slow the progression of and treat a condition and through rehabilitation, to reduce recurrence of the problem. In homelessness, this refers to emergency services, employment and housing strategies designed to support people who are moving out of homelessness and enhance their housing stability. As Culhane points out, these three categories should not be considered discrete, but more accurately, should exist along a continuum (Culhane et al., 2010).

The framework for preventing youth homelessness presented here (Diagram 6, below) uses the public health model of prevention as a starting point, but modifies the model to focus on three interconnected domains related to youth homelessness prevention: primary prevention, systems prevention and early intervention. As will be seen, prevention, as considered within this framework, necessarily involves addressing the personal and structural factors that contribute to a young person becoming homeless.



**Diagram 6**  
A Framework for Preventing  
Youth Homelessness

# Primary Prevention

It is commonly understood that it is preferable to prevent any social or health problem from occurring than it is to reverse it after it has occurred. The goal of primary prevention is to work upstream to protect individuals and families by addressing the root causes of homelessness, well before there is a high risk of becoming homeless. The main responsibility for the primary prevention of youth homelessness lies well outside the homelessness sector and includes institutions and sectors that can potentially have a significant impact on the lives of children, youth and families.

Youth homelessness prevention addresses the structural factors that contribute to youth and family homelessness, including poverty, lack of affordable housing, racism and discrimination, addictions and mental health issues within the household and for young people, a lack of educational engagement and achievement.

A focus on prevention should be directed at enhancing **protective factors** for and **resilience** of, young people. Protective factors include a person's individual qualities and personality traits that help them persevere in the face of stress, traumatic events or other problems (Smokowski et al., 1999; Crosnoe et al., 2002; Bender, 2007; Gilligan, 2000; Ungar, 2004). Protective factors help reduce or mitigate risk, ultimately contribute to health and well-being and may include decision-making and planning skills, as well as higher levels of self-esteem (Lightfoot et al., 2011), positive family and peer relations, engagement in school and other meaningful activities and lower levels of drug use or criminal involvement (Thompson, 2005). Protective factors can contribute to and enhance resilience, which:

“is the likely outcome of a child's both having qualities that are inherently protective (e.g. intelligence and positive coping skills) and having access to resources and networks of support that promote and help maintain a process of healing and psychological wellness.”

(Herrenkohl, 2008:94).

Prevention strategies which involve families, schools and communities, enhance protective factors in youth by building problem-solving skills, supporting engagement in meaningful activities, strengthening educational and community engagement and reducing family conflict.

<sup>9</sup> These factors have been drawn from a number of sources, including: Smokowski et al., 1999; Crosnoe et al., 2002; Bender, 2007; Gilligan, 2000; Ungar, 2004; Thompson, 2005; Herrenkohl, 2008; Lightfoot et al., 2011; O'Rourke, 2012.

Primary prevention also addresses discrimination. We know that some racialized minorities—including black and Aboriginal youth—are over-represented within the homeless youth population. Racism limits people's opportunities in education and employment (amongst other spheres) and thereby undermines young people's efforts to become independent.

We also know that a high percentage of homeless youth report being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, transsexual or queer, suggesting that the 'coming out' process, as well as bullying, can lead to the estrangement of young people from their families and communities. So while anti-discrimination work may on the surface seem a bit removed from youth homelessness prevention, it is in fact important.

Finally, youth homelessness prevention must necessarily address childhood abuse and neglect. In other words, a range of effective child protection interventions and family supports are a necessary part of any strategy to address youth homelessness. Two key areas need to be targeted in primary prevention strategies: the family and the school.

## Protective Factors for Preventing Youth Homelessness<sup>9</sup>

### Personal and Individual Factors

- Higher levels of problem solving, decision making and coping skills
- Higher levels of goal setting and planning skills
- Positive self esteem and feelings of self worth
- Age (older)
- Less likelihood of multiple problems
- Lower levels of criminal involvement
- Lower levels of substance abuse

### Interpersonal and Relational Factors

- Positive connections and support from some family members and positive communication
- Positive relationships with adult role models
- Access to support systems
- Positive relations with other caring, non-abusive adults
- Positive peer connections
- Feeling valued by others

### Community and organizational factors

- Youth role in decision-making
- Strong commitment to and engagement with school
- Engagement in meaningful activities and programs (creative, sports, recreation) and opportunities to be useful to others.
- Youth-friendly spaces
- Safety at home, school and in the neighbourhood

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# A

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## Working with Families

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It should go without saying that in supporting the transition of young people to adulthood, family matters. Yet, because histories of family conflict and/or abuse are so prevalent amongst street youth, the response of the sector is often to ignore family as part of the solution to youth homelessness (Winland et al., 2010; Winland, 2013). In fact, many services operate on the assumption that young people need to be protected—and isolated—from their families. Family gets framed as being ‘part of the past’, rather than as a resource that young people can and should draw on as they move forward.

In preventing youth homelessness, there is a need for more proactive work with families in order to address the factors that lead to conflict and more seriously, abuse. A young person is in many ways a product of their childhood and it behooves us as a society to address the harms that undermine families and healthy childhood and adolescent development. While those who are ‘chronically disconnected’ may have few familial resources to draw on, for those who are ‘temporarily disconnected’ or even ‘unstably connected’, there is an opportunity to draw families in as part of the solution.

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**There are several components to this focus on early intervention, including a range of parental supports and education strategies:**

1. Connecting families with resources and supports
2. Strengthening anger management and conflict resolution skills within families
3. Building foster parent skills and healthy childhood development
4. Ensuring young people have access to early childhood education, adequate nutrition and enriched engagement (arts, sports)
5. Promoting awareness of brain and child development

These programs and interventions of this nature, are often delivered through community-based family supports, because this is where young people and their families are. The idea is to connect families to community resources, promote positive parenting and enhance parents’ capacity to care for their children. Successful approaches often rely on “home visits” that bring the supports directly to parents and families and/or work through schools. This should include working with young (teen) parents, including those who have experienced homelessness. Such supports must necessarily be culturally sensitive, as linguistic and cultural differences can present barriers to accessing supports.

# B

## Working in Schools

Virtually every young person who becomes homeless was once in school. Moreover, educators are often the first adults outside of the family to suspect or become aware of underlying problems that may lead to youth homelessness. Whether this means bullying, educational disengagement, signs of abuse, trauma and/or family conflict, teachers are often able to identify young people at risk. The problems begin when teachers lack the knowledge base, resources or supports in order to intervene.

The prevention strategies that address youth homelessness in Australia and the UK recognize the central role that schools play in young people's lives. In communities across both countries, governments support a number of programs and resources that are delivered by non-profit organizations in schools and community centres. In Australia, the government funded Reconnect Program delivers education and prevention services to young people in schools (see box page 53). In the UK, community-based organizations develop and implement programs, working within a prevention framework supported and funded by the central government. Importantly, this prevention work begins in schools and targets youth even before they turn 16.

Key to this work is to enhance a young person's protective factors and personal development, thus making them more resilient. This means helping young people develop more effective problem-solving and conflict resolution skills and supporting programming that enhances educational engagement. In other cases, there is an active effort to engage parents and enhance their parenting skills.



## → (B) Working in Schools



### Alone in London

The Schools Work project operated by Alone in London (UK) is aimed at young people (aged 11 to 18), in order to help them understand and address conflict issues, whether they are occurring at home or at school. The aim of the project is to: a) prevent family breakdown and youth homelessness, b) provide crisis intervention, c) support and listen to young people and d) ensure that long-term support is available.

“The schools we work in are in inner London boroughs, (where young people) experience not only family conflicts but conflicts within their local communities, so for example they might be involved in local gangs, other issues they might face is that they can’t speak English as a first language, there will be cultural problems between the peers themselves such as bullying or racism. ... The sessions we do in the school are on “What is homelessness? What are the causes? And with that we do conflict resolution skills so we give them something concrete to learn about and take away with them, so the resolution isn’t just about family conflict but also peer conflict which would include things like listening skills, managing your anger a little bit better, communication blockers and things like that. At the end of the session we leave them an open forum for them to self refer, should they wish to.”

Aneesha Dawoojee, Family Mediation & Schools Work Manager  
(Smith & Deutschman (2010)).

**To find out more:**

<http://www.aloneinlondon.org/aloneinlondon/services/schools-work-project,1666,LA.html>



**Safe Place** is a national youth outreach program in the United States that focuses on educating young people about the dangers of life on the streets and also provides supports and interventions for young people who are at imminent risk of homelessness. The ‘safe place’ sign helps identify Safe Place locations, which are typically distributed in communities that are accessible to young people, such as schools, fire stations, libraries, grocery and convenience stores, public transit, YMCAs and other appropriate public buildings. When a young person goes to a Safe Place and makes contact with an employee, they are provided with a quiet comfortable place to wait while the employee contacts a Safe Place agency. Trained staff (volunteers and paid staff members) meet the young person and will help them access counselling, supports, a place to stay or other resources, depending on their needs. Once a plan is in place, the family will be contacted and efforts are made to provide families with help and professional referrals. Young people find out about Safe Place through presentations in schools, word of mouth, social media and public service announcements.

**For more information:**

<http://nationalsafeplace.org/>

## → (B) Working in Schools

Finally, there are programs designed to provide information about homelessness, help people work through and identify risks (both students and teachers) and inform them of available supports if ever they are in crisis.

These programs also serve another purpose: because they impart information about youth homelessness, they become an early warning system and may serve to get young people and their families to self-identify and report a need for support. The presence of agencies in schools also provides teachers with key points of contact when they suspect something is wrong.

Furthermore, Quilgars et al., (2008) report that these programs are generally well received and highly effective. They are particularly well received when there is a peer-educator component to the work. The Schools Training and Mentoring Project (STaMP), operated by St. Basils in Birmingham (UK) targets older teens and includes workshops on the harsh realities of being homeless. The STaMP program also provides school staff with robust assessment tools to help them make a determination of someone's risk of homelessness. When they identify someone deemed to be at risk, they are able to refer the young person to the STaMP project, where the young person will be linked to a trained peer mentor who has direct experience of homelessness (the peers are trained and given a lot of back-up). The mentoring relationship can then be established and nourished and the mentor can help the young person look at a number of options and links to appropriate resources.



### Homeless Hub

#### Homelessness Curriculum for Teachers and Students

Homelessness as a topic can provide educators and students many opportunities to learn, reflect and take action on an important issue that affects every community. The Homeless Hub offers a range of free resources for primary, intermediate and secondary teachers. This includes lesson plans across a number of subject areas, backgrounders, supplementary resources such as videos and resources for students. The purpose of these education materials is to raise awareness of homelessness and to inspire individuals, classrooms and schools into action. It is worth considering how these resources might be used (and expanded) as part of a broader school-based prevention strategy.

#### Resources include:

##### Lesson Plans

- Units for Primary grades
- Units for Secondary grades
- Getting ready
- Teaching children who are homeless
- Examples of student work
- Multimedia resources

##### For Students

- Art, videos, music
  - Factsheets
  - Research
  - Personal stories
- Curriculum resources can be obtained for FREE on the Homeless Hub: [www.homelesshub.ca](http://www.homelesshub.ca)

In their review of preventive strategies in the UK, Quilgars et al., (2008), argued that such programs provide a means to:

- 1 "increase young people's awareness of the 'harsh realities' of homelessness and dispel myths about the availability of social housing;"
- 2 "challenge stereotypes about homeless people, particularly regarding their culpability;"
- 3 "educate young people about the range of housing options available to them after leaving home and raise awareness of help available;"
- 4 "emphasize young people's responsibilities with regard to housing;" and
- 5 "teach conflict resolution skills that may be applied within and beyond the home and school."

(Quilgars et al., 2008:68)



The **Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary (BGCC)** offer eight programs targeting young people who are homeless or who are at risk of homelessness. These programs are all part of an integrated service model, that includes an emergency shelter, transitional housing and a Housing First program. One of the key innovations of the BGCC has been the degree to which they integrate prevention into their overall organization philosophy and through specific programs they offer.

## Some of these include:

### Script

This program offers assessment, referral and case management to young people who are at risk of or are currently experiencing homelessness. The program focuses on building positive relationships based on respect, support and empowerment through a client-centred, strength-based case management model. Young people are provided ongoing coaching and mentorship, focusing on enhancing motivation, taking responsibility, self care and living skills, managing money, personal administration, social networks and relationships, drug and alcohol misuse and physical, mental and emotional health. Young people are identified either through the program's outreach and engagement strategy, or they reach the program through the 828-HOPE Assessment and Referral service, which helps match the young person and their family with the supports they need. An assessment and referral worker is available to meet face-to-face with the young person within 48 hours.

### Elements

The overarching goal of the Elements Project is to divert youth from homelessness by enhancing family functioning so that the family can support the youth through adolescence and into a self-sufficient adulthood.

*"We went in this direction when our data started to show that many young people in the shelter system were still connected to family in some way and that given the right supports in accessing mental health, addiction, education and employment, they were able to strengthen relationships with their family and even move back in some cases"*

*(Kim Wirth, BGCC)*

Young people and families are identified through a range of referral sources, including Script, emergency youth shelters, schools, police and justice workers, Children's Services, health professionals, youth-serving support workers, self-referrals and families that make contact with BGCC. A Family Support Worker works with young people aged 12-24 and their families to improve family functioning and divert youth from homelessness. The program uses a strength-based, family systems perspective. The Family Support Workers offers relationship-based intensive case management including assessment, coaching and education, system navigation, referral and advocacy. The level and intensity of support will vary based on identified need and over time the intensity of supports is intended to decrease. The program integrates evaluation and has demonstrated improved understanding and relationships within the family; an 85% of youth at conclusion of service showed a decrease in risk behaviour using the Child and Adolescent Functional Assessment Scale (CAFAS) (Wirth, 2013).

*"It is my belief that nobody wakes up one day and decides to be a bad parent. It's more likely a culmination of a series of risks and challenges and in the end they struggle and relationships can break down, with families and young people feeling they have no other option (than to leave). We needed to give them a better option"*

*(Kim Wirth, BGCC)*

## Systems Prevention

Stopping the flow of young people from state care into homelessness should be a priority for any youth homelessness strategy. It is well understood that many young people become homeless upon leaving the care of child protection services (whether they leave by choice or ‘age out’) or when discharged from corrections, or mental health services, without adequate plans for housing and other supports. Systems Prevention means implementing strategies designed to ensure that people are not discharged into homelessness.

**Systems prevention means ensuring that young people are not discharged into homelessness when they leave the care of child protection services, or institutional settings such as detention or mental health services.**

## Transitions from Child Protection

Research consistently points to the high percentage of homeless youth who have had some involvement with child protection services, including foster care, group home placements or youth custodial centres (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Gaetz, 2002; Gaetz, O’Grady & Buccieri, 2009; Karabanow, 2004; Karabanow & Naylor, 2013; Raising the Roof, 2009; Serge et al., 2002). For instance, in three separate studies, the percentage of homeless youth who reported involvement with foster care or group homes ranged from 41 to 43 percent (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Gaetz, 2002; Gaetz, O’Grady & Buccieri, 2010).

It is both the experience of being in child protection and the transitions from protection to independence, that account for many of these problems. Some young people choose to leave because of bad experiences and inadequate support in group homes or in foster care. Other youth simply ‘age out’<sup>10</sup> of the foster care system and are left to fend for themselves, lacking necessary resources and never having been prepared for independent living at such a young age.

Difficult transitions from care often result in a range of negative outcomes, such as homelessness, unemployment, lack of educational engagement and achievement, involvement in corrections, lack of skills and potentially, a life of poverty. Many young people who leave care fail to make the transition to independent living because of underdeveloped living skills, inadequate education, lower levels of physical and emotional well-being and lack of supports and resources that most young people rely on when moving into adulthood (Courtney et al., 2005).

It is also important to note that in many jurisdictions, child protection legislation has not kept pace with the social and economic changes that make it much more difficult for young people to live independently at an early age. As discussed in Section 2, over 40% of young

Canadians (between the ages of 20 and 29) live with their parents because of the high cost of housing, poor labour market prospects and the need for additional educational qualifications. Child protection services that cut off support for young people at the age of 18, or even 21, leave young people in jeopardy and at risk of homelessness.

Different countries have addressed these challenges in different ways. The US government enacted the Independent Living Program in 1986 and Title I of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999. These programs are designed to help older youth who are leaving care develop the life skills and habits necessary for independent living. States are required to fund follow-up services for young people who have aged out of care; of those funds up to 30% are earmarked for supportive housing. These acts have been very successful and resulted in the implementation of independent living programs across the country (Courtney et al., 2001; Montgomery et al., 2006). In addition, the American Bar Association has also produced examples of Model Reforms to Child Protection laws that can be adapted at the State level (Horton-Newell et al., 2010).

The UK has also attempted to address the problematic discharge of children and youth from care to homelessness through legislation and key reforms to child welfare. After extensive review (Biehal et al., 1995) child welfare services were mandated to provide support for young people up to the age of 18 and in some cases up to 21, in order to support a smooth transition from care. A key piece of legislation

<sup>10</sup> In Canada, child protection legislation is a provincial responsibility and there are significant jurisdictional differences meaning that the actual age at which the State remains responsible for young people in care varies from province to province. In Ontario, for instance, young people ‘age out’ at 18, but can also voluntarily withdraw from care at 16.

## → Transitions from Child Protection

was the **Children (Leaving Care) Act** of 2000, which was further reinforced by the **Homelessness Act** of 2002 and the **Children's Act** of 2004, which prioritized the need for services and support for young people exiting the child welfare system. The Children (Leaving Care) Act ensured that local governments were directly responsible for youth aged 16 and older (up to the age of 18) who left care. Three key supports included: 1) benefits—young people living independently are entitled to income supplements, 2) assessment—to be done when the young person reaches 16, to aid with the transition process and 3) planning—young people are to be assigned personal advisors, who would help establish a 'pathway plan' that lasted until the young person reached 21 years of age (to be reviewed with the young person at least every six months). In commenting on the legislation in the context of an international review of best practices, Reid (2007) suggests:

“This legislation is effective because it targets core concerns for youth leaving care such as housing, education and employment, finances and social support with flexible approaches to engage youth in the decision-making processes. The legislation also requires agencies to work cooperatively with each other to meet the needs of youth”

(Reid, 2007:44)

In Australia, child protection legislation, policies and practices are the responsibility of community services in each state and territory. Different jurisdictions have different

programs and some are supported at the national level. Young people at risk of leaving care, either because they 'aged out' or left due to problems with their foster care experience, are offered a more intensive form of support, which is often referred to as the 'Lead Tenant' program (Australian Senate Community Affairs Committee, 2005). This model incorporates elements of treatment foster care, where specially trained caregivers are recruited (and receive higher than usual remuneration) to provide intensive placement support and wrap-around services (Reid, C. 2007). Youth are able to stay in the program from 12 months to 24 months. Finally, the **Transition to Independent Living Allowance** (<http://www.tila.org.au/>) is a national program that provides particularly vulnerable youth who have left care up to \$1,000 a month in support for an additional year.

In Canada, child protection is a provincial responsibility, with legislation and practice varying from province to province. Indeed, many provinces continually update their legislation. The recent Blueprint for Fundamental Change to Ontario's Child Welfare System outlined a number of key recommendations from former crown wards for updating provincial legislation (Youth Leaving Care Working Group, 2013). Irwin Elman, director of the Office for the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, argues that effective reforms, including extending the age of child welfare support to 25, would cost about 26 million dollars, but see a savings of 132 million dollars over 40 years (Monsebratten, 2013).

An effective response to youth homelessness must necessarily incorporate reforms to child protection legislation and services. In considering what is known about reforming child protection internationally and in light of the recommendations of the Ontario Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth it is proposed that effective reforms should include the following elements:

### Child protection legislation and policy should:

- Raise the age to which young people are entitled to care and support to at least 21, or if in school, until 25.
- Allow young people access to child protection services up to the age of 18.
- Allow young people who leave care to reenter, if desired.
- Ensure that young people have access to and are aware of funding for post-secondary education beyond the age of 18.
- Provide transitional funding to help young people who have left care obtain stable housing.

### Child protection services should:

- Ensure that all transition plans are coordinated and integrated and information is shared with parents (where relevant) and across sectors.
- Actively assist youth in finding affordable housing.
- Coordinate with public education systems to facilitate stronger student engagement.
- Provide young people with choices and actively involve them in the transition process to promote and support self-advocacy.
- Provide clear alternatives outside the system for young people who choose to leave care because of problematic experiences in foster care or group homes. These alternatives should necessarily include access to housing and supports.

## Leaving Corrections and Effective Discharge Planning

We know from extensive research that young people who are homeless are on average more criminally involved than domiciled youth (Baron, 2013; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Tanner & Wortley, 2002) and at the same time, receive much more police attention regardless of their criminal involvement (O’Grady et al., 2011; 2013). Many become involved with the criminal justice system, either as juvenile offenders or as young adults. A growing body of Canadian research focuses on the bidirectional relationship between homelessness and prison (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2006; 2009; Novac et al., 2006; 2007; Kellen et al., 2010). That is, people who are homeless are more likely to become imprisoned and are over-represented in the prison population. Additionally, because of the inadequacy of discharge planning and reintegration policies and practices, both for those who are convicted and those awaiting trial on remand, many ex-prisoners are discharged directly into homelessness. Without proper and adequate transitional support (including housing), there is a risk of reoffending and/or enduring homelessness (DeLisi, 2000; Gowan, 2002; Kushel et al., 2005; Metraux & Culhane, 2004; Vitelli, 1993).

While research shows that attention to discharge planning and support for reintegration to independent living, for people leaving corrections has benefits in terms of reduced recidivism, increased public safety and reduced homelessness (Harrison, 2001; Visher & Travis, 2003; Petersilia, 2001a;b; Travis & Petersilia, 2001), the evidence often collides with ‘get tough on crime’ policies that, in a sense, achieve the opposite (this is particularly important in the Canadian context, where we are implementing policies that follow from the mistakes made in the United States from the 1970s to 1990s).

Despite this history, there are programs that provide support based on an understanding of the challenges faced by young offenders upon reintegration. In the United States, Intensive Aftercare programs for juvenile offenders were first introduced by the Department of Justice in the 1970s to provide high-risk young offenders with appropriate supervision and services (Altschuler & Armstrong, 1994). Using a ‘case management’ approach, offenders are assessed and individualized case plans are developed, which ideally incorporate family and community perspectives in addition to those of the young person and lay out practical approaches for meeting goals. Five key principles guide such interventions:

1. Preparing youth for progressively increased responsibility and freedom in the community;
2. Facilitating youth-community interaction and involvement;
3. Working with youth and targeted community support systems on traits needed for constructive interaction and successful community adjustment;
4. Developing new resources and supports; and
5. Monitoring and testing the youth and the community on their ability to interact productively (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2007).

Ensuring that young people discharged from prison have access to safe affordable housing not only improves their life chances, but also benefits communities, as recidivism rates decline. In other words, providing housing for released young offenders is both a housing and crime reduction issue. In Canada, Wood’s Homes and the Calgary John Howard Society are piloting an innovative program for young offenders that incorporates a Housing First philosophy.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Housing First (Gaetz, S., Scott, F. & Gulliver, T. (Eds.) (2013): *Housing First in Canada: Supporting Communities to End Homelessness*. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press) is a well established and evaluated response to homelessness (Goering et al., 2012; Tsemberis et al, 2004; Waegemakers-Schiff & Rook, 2012; Yanos et al., 2004) that involves providing people with housing without conditions as soon as possible and then giving them the necessary supports they need to sustain their housing and make the transition to independence. This approach will be discussed in more detail in Section Five.

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The Roofs For Youth Project is a multi-agency youth homelessness prevention strategy that targets youth who are transitioning from corrections and are “viewed as disenfranchised in that they are without family supports and do not have status with Child and Family Services and they are further marginalized in that they do not qualify for many of the services available to adults” (Woods Homes, 2012:2). These youth are considered extremely vulnerable to homelessness and the continuous cycle between detention and the streets.

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## The Wood's Homes program design includes:

### Initial Assessment

Building on solid relationships with the Calgary Young Offenders Centre, probation services and agency partners, Roofs receives referrals, completes initial assessments and attempts to develop deep connections, which are intended to continue once the youth are released into the community.

### Case Management

After an initial assessment, Roofs For Youth develops an individualized and client-centered case management plan based on client need and circumstances. They adopt a ‘positive youth development’ perspective that focuses on a youth’s strengths and assets and identifies family and support networks, as well as risk factors. The partnership model is designed to enmesh young people within a ‘system of care’ and to help them access specialized services and resources (addictions, mental health, Aboriginal supports, etc.) based on identified need.

### Housing

The program incorporates a Housing First scattered site model and provides young people with case management, financial support, housing and clinical support (mental health and addictions). The program adopts a ‘zero discharge into homelessness’ policy and works with youth to find appropriate accommodation and ensure that options are available outside of the shelter system if housing breaks down.

### Skills Building

Drawing from a positive youth development framework and using cognitive behavioural interventions the program:

1. Identifies the youth’s personal strengths in order to build self-esteem and a positive sense of self.
2. Works to improve the youth’s communication and problem solving skills.
3. Assists the youth to access training or educational opportunities.

### Leveraging Natural Supports

This is important because the program seeks to leverage the natural supports the young person may possess (family, friends and caring adults) and wherever possible, involve family and provide supports to help mediate and nurture effective family relationships. The program also seeks to facilitate “pro-social experiences, activities and behaviours through positive relationships with peers and adults who can also serve as role-models or mentors” (Woods Homes, 2012:20). At the same time, this means minimizing contact with other young offenders.

## Discharge Support from Hospital and Mental Health Facilities

Those who work in the homelessness sector are well aware that individuals are often discharged from hospitals and mental health facilities into homelessness. There are two main consequences to this. First, the mental health and well-being of such individuals is likely to worsen if discharged into homelessness rather than housing and second, staff in emergency shelters and day programs are not well-equipped to provide necessary and appropriate supports for people in such situations.

Cheryl Forchuk is a leading researcher on transitions from psychiatric wards into homelessness, in terms of understanding both the consequences for individuals who experience this and effective intervention models that ensure successful transitions to the community through housing and supports.

According to Forchuk, emergency shelters—even well run shelters—are “not appropriate places for recovery from mental illnesses” (Forchuk et al., 2006:301). Many of the problems we associate with shelters—lack of privacy, low resident/staff ratios, exposure to drugs and the sex trade, real or perceived threats to safety, being around others who are ill or who have mental health problems and in some cases overcrowding—can exacerbate problems for psychiatric survivors. Unfortunately, this happens all too often. In their study of people discharged from psychiatric wards in London—a mid-sized Canadian city—they found that 167 of 1,588 (10.5%) individuals were discharged with no fixed address in a single year (Forchuk et al., 2006). Data from local emergency shelters showed the number to be even higher at 194. Structural factors contribute to this situation, including a trend towards shorter stays in hospital as an in-patient and a dramatic reduction in the availability of affordable housing in most Canadian cities. For young people under the age of 25, structural barriers include the difficulty in obtaining a living wage and full-time hours.

Research from Canada and the United States suggests that necessary reforms and interventions can dramatically reduce the risk of homelessness for those discharged from mental health facilities, with a resultant improvement in mental health and well-being (Forchuk et al., 2008; 2011; Herman et al., 2011; Kaspro & Rosenheck, 2007; Goldfinger et al., 1999; Susser et al., 1997). A randomized control trial by Herman et al., (2011) demonstrates that Critical Time Interventions (CTI) upon discharge are designed to:

“prevent recurrent homelessness and other adverse outcomes following discharge in two ways: by strengthening the individual's long-term ties to services, family and friends; and by providing emotional and practical support during the critical time of transition. An important aspect of CTI is that post-discharge services are delivered by a worker who has established a relationship with the client before discharge.”

(Herman et al., 2011:2)

In a London, Ontario, pilot study, patients at risk of being discharged with ‘no fixed address’ were provided with a timely intervention (Forchuk et al., 2008; 2011). This included: 1) assessment and immediate response to client need (it is argued that a determination of risk of homelessness should be made early, upon admittance); 2) goal planning and advocacy to coordinate supports; 3) assistance in finding affordable housing, 4) a streamlined process (including fast tracking) so that individuals could receive government benefits to pay for first and last month's rent.

The results of this study and others clearly demonstrate that targeted and relatively brief support has a substantial and lasting impact on the risk of becoming homeless for those discharged from mental health facilities.

In Alberta, the province is also piloting similar policies and protocols to reduce the likelihood that people are discharged from in-patient mental health care into homelessness. This work demonstrates that it is possible to implement more effective interventions that can contribute to thoughtful, respectful and effective responses to homelessness and the needs of mental health consumer- survivors.

## Early Intervention

The importance of early intervention cannot be underestimated. This is true not only when considering discharge from institutional settings, but in other contexts, as well. Early intervention means identifying and addressing the physical, emotional, material, interpersonal, social and educational needs of young people who are at imminent risk of becoming, or who have just become, homeless. This is the point at which prevention and emergency services intersect, for early intervention strategies can take place before a youth becomes homeless (or when one is at imminent risk) or immediately after. So, while some of these interventions will be delivered by emergency services, they are considered preventive in that the goal is to provide proper supports so that a person's experience of homelessness is as short as possible and hopefully non-recurrent.

The goal is to address the immediate risk of homelessness, provide young people and their families with necessary supports and enhance resilience while reducing the potential for negative outcomes. For those who do wind up having to leave home, early intervention also means reducing the risk of protracted homelessness (more than a month) for young people.

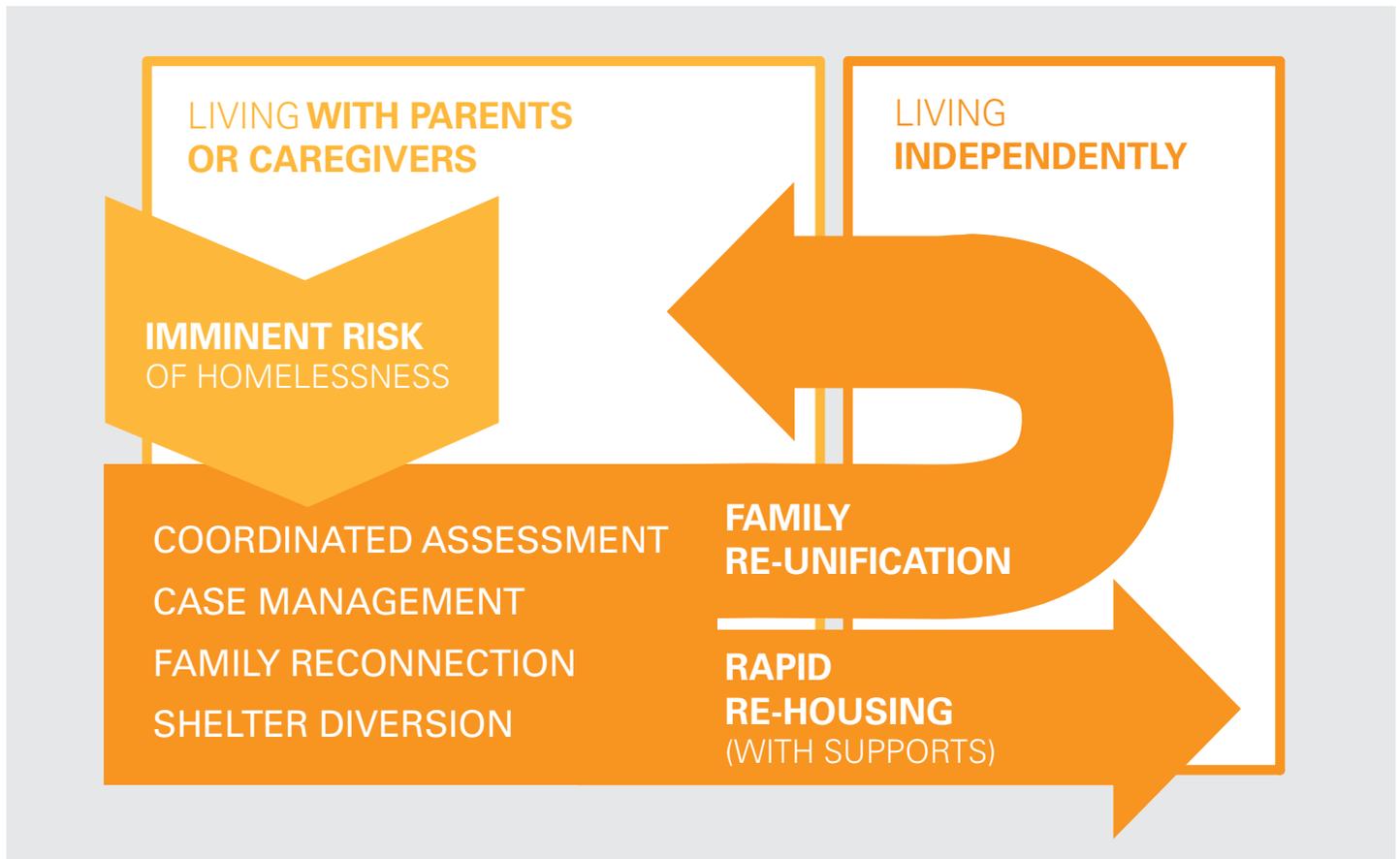
Diagram 7 (see page 46) identifies four key and interrelated strategies of early intervention, including: Coordinated Assessment, Case Management, Family Reconnection and Shelter Diversion. Together, these interventions are designed to reconcile and support relationships so that young people can move back home or in with other family members and when this is not possible (for safety reasons), help them move into independent (and supported) accommodation in a safe and planned way. The goal is to intervene before a young person is forced to leave their community and winds up homeless on the streets or in an emergency shelter. Once on the streets, a young person may be drawn into the street lifestyle and become entrenched in their homelessness.

**Early intervention** refers to strategies designed to address the immediate risk of homelessness, provide young people and their families with necessary supports and enhance resilience while reducing the potential for negative outcomes.



## → Early Intervention

Early intervention strategies such as the one presented here are necessarily supported by integrated systems-based approaches that facilitate coordinated engagement. This systems approach is a central feature of the prevention response to youth homelessness in both Australia and the UK. In both cases, government funded programs, delivered by the not-for-profit sector, provide a range of services and supports for young people and their families. It is important to note that the success of early intervention approaches depends on integration of the programs and strategies into a 'system of care', wherein services are coordinated and integrated, rather than delivered by agencies that are disconnected from the larger system. Below is a short description of the central components of an early intervention strategy.



**Diagram 7**  
Early Intervention Framework

## Coordinated Assessment

Coordinated Assessment (also known as Coordinated Intake and in the UK as Common Assessment) is key to delivering integrated and focused early interventions for young people at risk of homelessness. It is a standardized approach to assessing a young person's current situation, the acuity of their needs and the services they currently receive and may require in the future. It takes into account the background factors that contribute to risk and resilience, changes in acuity and the role parents, caregivers, community and environmental factors play on the young person's development. The National Alliance to End Homelessness in the US argues that coordinated assessment undergirds a more efficient and effective homelessness response through:

1. **Helping** people move through the system faster (by reducing the amount of time people spend moving from program to program before finding the right match);
2. **Reducing** new entries into homelessness (by consistently offering prevention and diversion resources upfront, reducing the number of people entering the system unnecessarily); and
3. **Improving** data collection and quality and providing accurate information on what kind of assistance consumers need. (NAEH, 2012 Coordinated Assessment Toolkit).

The key to coordinated assessment is to employ it as a system-wide process by having all agencies use the same assessment framework and instrument in order to standardize current practices and provide comprehensive and consistent client information. In the United States, researchers have advocated for coordinated assessment as key to effective prevention and rapid rehousing programs (Burt, 2007). If a community has adopted a 'system of care' approach, measures should be taken to share the information between agencies and providers<sup>12</sup> and thus reduce duplication of assessments and enable effective case management, such that clients get timely access to the most appropriate services based on need. So while common assessment means that all agencies use the same tool, centralized intake refers to a pooling of information that different providers can have access to. This facilitates systems coordination and means that youth won't have to tell their story multiple times (and it is important to remember that these stories can be emotionally difficult to share (traumatic) or stigmatizing (LGBTQ status, criminal involvement, mental health problems etc.)). This is important, because in larger cities, young people who are homeless often complain about having to retell their story upon intake at every new agency.



### Coordinated Assessment toolkit

The NAEH has developed this toolkit to help communities plan for, implement and evaluate a coordinated assessment system. The toolkit is designed to allow individual communities to modify and tailor the tools to fit their individual needs. The toolkit includes the following components:

- 
- Planning and Assessment
- Data and Implementation
- Evaluation
- Community Examples and Materials

<sup>12</sup> To enable this, communities must ensure client consent and address privacy concerns at the legislative and agency levels.

## Common Assessment Framework in the United Kingdom

The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) was designed as a generic assessment tool to be used by practitioners from different sectors in England. The CAF is intended to: “help practitioners working with children, young people and families to assess children and young people’s additional needs for earlier and more effective services and develop a common understanding of those needs and how to work together to meet them” (CAF–For Practitioners:6). It is considered a key tool for the coordination of services. The idea is that everyone who works with young people should know about the CAF and how to deliver it. The CAF builds upon “Every Child Matters–Change for Children”, a national framework to help local communities develop effective and integrated supports for children and young adults. The CAF consists of:

1. A pre-assessment checklist to help decide who would benefit from a common assessment
2. A process to enable practitioners in the children and young people’s workforce to undertake a common assessment and then act on the results
3. A standard form to record the assessment
4. A delivery plan and review form

Linked with a case management strategy (see below), the assessment helps identify needs and coordinate interventions. Implementation of the CAF has been a challenge in some jurisdictions, due to capacity and resource issues (Smith and Duckett, 2010). However, evaluations of the CAF have demonstrated positive service outcomes, including an improvement in “multi agency working, information sharing and (a reduction in) referral rates to local authorities” (Smith and Duckett, 2010:17).

### Centralized Intake

Coordinated assessment is often supported by some form of centralized intake or single point of entry, which could be the first emergency shelter someone presents at, a dedicated assessment facility, or through a dispersed model where people come into contact with key workers in the system, in schools, community or social service settings (Gardner et al., 2010). Getting timely information and supports to young people and their families is crucial, given that educators and other service providers may not readily identify young people at the time of crisis. Centralized intake means that not only is a common assessment used, but that the information gathered is centralized so multiple service providers have access to it. The argument is that homeless services become less fragmented, access is more seamless and scarce resources are used more effectively. In the American context, centralized intake and assessment is often conducted with and supports the use of, the HMIS

system. Central intake was a key program requirement of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)’s 2008 **Rapid Re-Housing for Families demonstration project**.<sup>13</sup> Several communities in the United Kingdom have pioneered “**Single Point Access**” information and assessment, an easy to access hub (via phone or internet) where young people can get needed information, supports and access to services. As a system, it relies on a strong communication strategy so that young people and families know about it (through schools and community centres, for instance), a good assessment system (such as CAF) and strong organizational links to services both within and external to the homelessness sector. As both a ‘triage’ service and a clearinghouse, a single point access service ensures consistency of assessment, a reduction in duplication and an enhanced and effective evaluation of the appropriateness of services.

Some examples of how this works in the UK include **St. Basil’s “Young Person’s Hub”** in Birmingham (United Kingdom), which provides a single access point for advice, referrals and intake. Young people can access service through a 24-hour phone line, via the internet or through the centre directly (an appointment is typically required).

**The Swansea BAYS project** (UK)<sup>14</sup> is another example, where all young people who become homeless (including young people who are leaving care) receive a joint social work and housing assessment. They are provided with appropriate supports based on need. Staff have specialized training in order to offer appropriate advice and support.

Given advances in technology, the basic principles of “Single Point Access” could be provided in a more decentralized fashion through web-based supports and/or a more diverse range of agencies and services. Such an approach would require a common assessment framework, a shared data management system and a communication and promotion strategy. Ideally it would be made available through schools, community centers and other places frequented by young people.

<sup>13</sup> The document, “Centralized Intake for Helping People Experiencing Homelessness: Overview, Community Profiles and Resources” (Gardner et al., 2010), provides a number of excellent and detailed case study examples of how to implement such a program.

<sup>14</sup> Once again, it is important to caution the reader that all case studies or program examples describe what is known at the time of the writing of the report and that program models, funding arrangements and organizational dynamics can lead to dramatic changes in service delivery and outcomes.

## Case Management

The National Case Management Network of Canada (NCMN) defines case management as:

“[a] collaborative, client-driven process for the provision of quality health and support services through the effective and efficient use of resources. Case management supports the client’s achievement of safe, realistic and reasonable goals within a complex health, social and fiscal environment”

(National Case Management Network of Canada, 2009, p.8).

As part of an early intervention strategy, case management is a comprehensive and strategic form of service provision whereby a case worker assesses the needs of the client (and potentially their family) and, when appropriate, arranges, coordinates and advocates for delivery and access to a range of programs and services designed to meet the individual’s needs.

A client-centered case management approach ensures that the young person has a major say in identifying goals and service needs and that there is shared accountability. The goal of case management is to empower young people and promote an improved quality of life by facilitating timely access to the necessary supports and thus reduce the risk of homelessness and/or help young people achieve housing stability.

Case management is well-established in social work and health care and there are many different approaches and practices (Milaney, 2011a; Morse, 1998). Case management can be short-term (as in the Critical Time Intervention) or long-term and ongoing, dependent upon an identified need for crisis intervention related to problematic transitions, or for supports around chronic conditions. Critical Time Intervention (CTI) models are key to early intervention practice in that they are designed to prevent recurrent homelessness and to help people transition to independence (Baumgartner & Herman, 2012; Schutt et al., 2009; Herman & Mandiberg, 2010). This is achieved through:

“strengthening the individual’s long-term ties to services, family and friends; and by providing emotional and practical support during the critical time of transition. An important aspect of CTI is that post-discharge services are delivered by workers who have established relationships with patients during their institutional stay.”

(<http://www.criticaltime.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/cti-handout4.pdf>)

A case management approach, then, necessarily works best with a system of care approach, where links are made to necessary services and supports, based on identified client need. That is, once a young person becomes homeless, or is identified as being at risk, they are not simply unleashed into the emergency services sector. An intake is done, risks are identified, goals are established and plans are put in place. Youth therefore become ‘clients’ not of specific agencies, per se, but rather, of the sector. They are supported from the moment they are identified as (potentially) homeless, right through to the solution stage and then after they have either returned home, or moved into a place of their own if there is need for continued support.

Case management, of course, requires a willingness on the part of the young person to participate and the building of a potentially therapeutic relationship may take time. When young people become homeless and have very weak links or engagement with homelessness services, schools or other supports and are only accessed through outreach and/or day programs, a period of relationship and trust building may be required before case management can be usefully implemented.

In reviewing case management as a key component of strategies to end homelessness, Milaney (2011a; b; 2012) identified it as a strengths-based team approach with six key dimensions:

1. **Collaboration and cooperation:** A true team approach, involving several people with different backgrounds, skills and areas of expertise.
2. **Right matching of services:** Person-centered and based on the complexity of need.
3. **Contextual case management:** Interventions must appropriately take account of age, ability, culture, gender and sexual orientation. In addition, an understanding of broader structural factors and personal history (of violence, sexual abuse or assault, for instance) must underline strategies and mode of engagement.
4. **The right kind of engagement:** Building a strong relationship based on respectful encounters, openness, listening skills, non-judgmental attitudes and advocacy.
5. **Coordinated and well-managed system:** Integrating the intervention into the broader system of care.
6. **Evaluation for success:** The ongoing and consistent assessment of case managed supports.

## → Case Management

There are different case management tools available that enable acuity, needs and strengths assessment and assist with planning. One popular tool is the **Outcomes Star** (see box). Another one that is used in some communities in Canada (such as Hamilton by the StreetYouth Planning Collaborative) is called the **Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS)**. Though not developed specifically for the homelessness sector (it is used more broadly by case managers working with children and youth in children's services, mental health, juvenile justice and educational contexts, for instance) as a multi-purpose tool it is designed to support decision making, including level of care and service planning, by case managers, young people and their caregivers. It allows for the identification of both needs and strengths and is designed to facilitate supports serving the needs of the young person, rather than forcing the young person to fit the service. There are a number of free resources available to support the use of CANS<sup>15</sup> and a 'train the trainer' approach to education and support builds community capacity to use the tool and reduces the need for providers to rely on the expertise of expensive consultants.



An interesting case management practice that incorporates evaluation is the Outcomes Star, developed in the UK by St. Mungo's, a leading London-based homelessness serving organization and Triangle Consulting. The case management emphasis begins with a client-centred approach and recognition of both the complexity and diversity of experiences and challenges that people who experience homelessness face. In using a 'stages of change' model, the Outcomes Star addresses a number of possible issues that a client and their case worker agree should be priorities for change. Specific tool for homeless youth were developed, which provide young people with a map or conceptual tool for the journey they are to undertake and also allow them to plot and monitor their progress.

As an evaluation tool, the Outcomes Star engages clients and becomes a means of tracking, supporting and gathering evidence for change. The data from individual cases can be aggregated to understand and evaluate program level work, organizational activity or sector-wide change. A number of agencies in Canada are exploring its applicability in the Canadian context and it is also being taken up in Australia.

**For more information, go to:**  
<http://www.outcomesstar.org.uk/>

**15** Resources are available on the following websites:

**The Praed Foundation**

<http://www.praedfoundation.org/About%20the%20CANS.html#Here>

**Government of Massachusetts Health and Human Services**

<http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/gov/commissions-and-initiatives/cbhi/child-and-adolescent-needs-and-strengths-cans/>

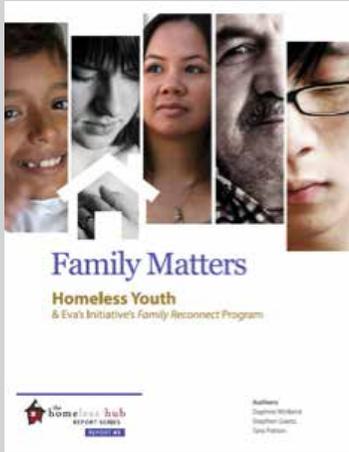
## Family Reunification

The underlying ethos of a family reconnection approach is that family is important to almost everyone and that a truly effective response to youth homelessness must consider the role that family—and the potential of reconciling damaged relationships—can play in helping street youth move forward with their lives. “For many, if not most street youth, family does matter in some way and ... addressing family issues can help young people move into adulthood in a healthier way and potentially move out of homelessness.” (Winland et al., 2011:15) . What actually constitutes a ‘family’ is variable, based on individual experience (growing up with grandparents, for instance) and cultural contexts. In doing this work the family should be defined with, or by, the young person. The goal of family reconnection is to prevent youth homelessness, to rapidly rehouse those who become homeless and to secure stable housing for youth who have been homeless over a long period of time. It means much more than merely sending a young person back home into a context where they may once again be at ‘imminent risk of homelessness’. Rather, the goal is to break the cycle of homelessness by working with the youth and their family on the underlying issues leading to conflict. For the majority of young people who are homeless (those who are ‘temporarily disconnected’ or ‘unstably connected’), this is a particularly important kind of intervention to consider and should be an option in every case management plan.

Until recently, the possibility and potential of reconnecting with family has, unfortunately, rarely been prioritized in the Canadian response to youth homelessness and in fact, has often been ignored (Winland et al., 2011; Winland, 2013). Emergency services tend to focus on providing refuge for young people and helping them reach self-sufficiency and independence. This is perhaps not surprising, nor entirely unreasonable, given that so many homeless youth fled households characterized by physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse and/or the child protection system. In such a context, family is often deemed to be part of the young person’s past and moving home may be neither desirable, nor possible.

While it is easy to dismiss the role of family in the lives of young people who have had difficult pasts, we need to be careful not to “throw the baby out with the bathwater,” so to speak. In reframing our understanding of the potential role of families in the lives of street youth, we need to consider that the families defined as problematic may themselves be complex and diverse in composition. So, while a young person may experience conflict (even violence) with one or more members of their family, there may potentially be important, supportive and/or redeemable relationships with other family members; individuals that can play an important role in a young person’s transition to independence. It is also important to consider that relationships characterized by conflict are not always irreconcilable and that many underlying conflicts can be addressed with the right supports and interventions. The point is that even when conflicts lead to young people leaving home, we should not forego the possibility that those conflictual relations can improve (Winland et al., 2011; Winland, 2013).

It is also worth pointing out that the vast majority of homeless youth fit into the category of “temporarily disconnected” and “unstably connected,” according to the NAEH typology discussed earlier in the report. This means that for these young people, there exists some level of connectedness with at least some family members.



To find out more, read the COH [Family Matters](#) report:

[www.homelesshub.ca/familymatters](http://www.homelesshub.ca/familymatters)

In implementing any family reconnection strategy the ultimate guiding principle is necessarily the protection and safety of the young person.

## → Family Reunification

The effectiveness and underlying logic of program-based family mediation and reconnection models suggests that a more ambitious application of the basic tenets of the program is possible when implemented more broadly at a 'systems level'. That is, in contrast to developing an agency-based program or response, it is possible to approach the issue from a more integrated early intervention system approach that includes common assessment, centralized intake and case management doing this brings together a range of services and approaches that work across the street youth sector and ideally, engage with programs, services and institutions 'upstream' (that is, before the young person becomes homeless). No young person should access emergency shelters and supports without undergoing an assessment to determine the potential for family reunification.

Scaling up family reunification programming can thus be seen as a key preventive approach to youth homelessness. There are several key features to an integrated, systems level approach to family reconnection.

- A** Systems level approaches require strong institutional support by all levels of government, ensuring that family reconnection programming is widely available across jurisdictions. In other words, young people should have access to such interventions wherever they live.
- B** Programming requires systems-based cross-sectoral collaboration between child protection services, the education system, the mental health sector, housing, settlement and corrections, for instance.
- C** A prevention and early intervention model requires an integrated jurisdictional approach with strong communication links, so that appropriate and timely interventions can take place.
- D** Finally, an intervention program such as Family Reconnect must be widely available—and in some ways targeted—to young people who are under the age of 16. The homelessness sector in Canada is largely reactive and is designed to serve young people who are 16 and older. A more effective approach would identify and begin preventive work with young people who are below that age threshold.

In both Australia and the UK, family connection is not simply a program model, but more significantly is seen as a philosophy underlying their response to youth homelessness. The key here is that family intervention is built in to their integrated systems approaches and in the case of Australia, has been scaled up to be a national program (see next page). Both of these examples point to the possibility of moving beyond a program based model, to an integrated systems approach in Canada.



### Eva's Family Reconnect

While there are very innovative and successful programs in Canada that focus on reconnecting homeless youth with their families (Kelowna, Calgary and Halifax, for instance), perhaps the best known is Eva's Family Reconnect program located within a mid-town shelter for homeless youth, in Toronto. The Family Reconnect program was established with a mandate to assist young people aged 16-24 interested in addressing and potentially reconciling differences with their families (Family Reconnect Program Strategic Plan, 2009). The foundational principle of the program is that family is significant in everyone's lives and this is equally true for street youth.

The main focus of Eva's Family Reconnect program is to offer individual and family support for youth in the shelter system and those still living in the community but at risk of becoming homeless. Staff work with clients to address and potentially resolve family conflict through individual and family counselling, referrals to other agencies and services, psychiatric assessments, psychological assessments for learning disabilities, accompaniment and advocacy, for young people who are interested in developing healthier relationships with their families.

#### For more information:

Winland et al. (2010) Family Matters: Homeless Youth and Eva's Initiatives "Family Reconnect" Program

# Family Reconnect Program



In Australia, the “Reconnect Program” has been in operation since 1999. Though a government sponsored initiative, the early intervention program is delivered through community-based services. The goal of Reconnect is to work with young people when they are identified as ‘at risk’ of homelessness and help them to stabilize their living situation and ‘improve their level of engagement with family, work, education and training in their local community” (Australian Government, 2013: Reconnect). The program is a classic example of a systems level approach to early intervention, in that it is widely available across the country and works across institutional jurisdictions to provide young people who become—or are at risk of becoming—homeless with the supports they need to stay at home, or find alternative supportive living arrangements. There are over 100 Reconnect programs and some specialize in supporting sub-populations such as Aboriginal youth, refugees and new immigrants and lesbian, gay and bisexual youth. While funded by the central government, these programs nevertheless operate through a network of community-based early intervention services that share the goal of assisting youth to stabilize their current living situations, as well as improve their level of engagement and attachments within their community (Australian Government, 2009).

The Reconnect Program targets young people aged 12-18 (and their families) who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness. The service delivery model of Australia’s Reconnect program includes:

“a focus on responding quickly when a young person or family is referred; a ‘toolbox’ of approaches that include counselling, mediation and practical support; and collaboration with other service providers. As well as providing assistance to individual young people and their families, Reconnect services also provide group programs, undertake community development projects and work with other agencies to increase the broader service system’s capacity to intervene early in youth homelessness.”

(Australian Government, 2003:8)

The Reconnect program emphasizes accessibility, a client-centered orientation and a holistic approach to service delivery and one that has been extensively evaluated (Evans & Shaver, 2001; Australian Government, 2003; 2013. In a comprehensive evaluation of the program (Australian Government, 2003), they identified the following positive and sustainable outcomes for young people and their families, including improvements in:

- The stability of young people’s living situations.
- Young people’s reported ability to manage family conflict and this improvement was sustained over time.
- Parents’ capacity to manage conflict.
- Communication within families.
- Young people’s attitudes to school.
- Young people’s engagement with education and employment.
- Young people’s engagement with community.

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## → Family Reunification

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In the United Kingdom, family reconnection is a feature of their strategic and integrated approach to youth homelessness and is based on the philosophy that for most youth, life chances generally improve the longer they stay with their families and the more ‘planned’ their transition is to living independently (See Alone in London box for a case study on next page).

The key point of such a preventive approach is that young people and their families need to be able to make good choices about whether to continue to live together or apart and if the latter is the case, to ensure that they have appropriate resources and skilled support in order to avoid homelessness.

“Key elements of ‘what works’ include flexible and client-centered provision, close liaison with key agencies and building in support from other agencies when necessary. The need for timely intervention was also highlighted, as was the need for active promotion of the availability of the service and early contact with clients on referral.”

(Pawson et al., 2007:14)

Again, reflecting the ‘partnership’ approach of the UK strategy, local governments are expected to develop interventions that are delivered in collaboration with key partners including Children’s Services, the youth service, the not-for-profit sector and very importantly, schools. This collaborative, cross-sectoral approach is seen as necessary in supporting young people and their families and to prevent homelessness. Most of these programs operate on a referral basis and common elements of such programs include optional family mediation, parenting support and housing options counselling. While the goal is to resolve family disputes, there is also recognition of the necessity of finding suitable accommodation for young people who are leaving home and who do not intend to, or cannot, return.

The family-based prevention programs in the UK have also been evaluated. A cost-benefit analysis by DePaul UK projected that an investment in prevention-based early intervention strategies would save on average £9,493 (\$14,838 Cdn) per case (Insley, 2011a).

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In the United Kingdom, Alone in London is a non-profit organization that has been supporting young people at risk of homelessness between the ages of 16 and 25, since 1972. Staff and volunteers work across 32 London boroughs and offer the following services:

- Free telephone advice and assistance for young people.
- A drop-in centre in Hackney for advice and support.
- Family mediation to enable young people to maintain positive relationships with parents and other family members.
- Training and employment guidance.
- Homelessness prevention and conflict resolution support and advice for teachers.

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As part of their prevention model, they offer young people and their families mediation services with the goal of helping resolve conflict. Adopting a client-centred approach, they engage in mediation if desired by the young person and support young people and their families to make informed choices. Recognizing the complexity of family relationships and the fact that many young people cannot return home, they nevertheless work to support and sustain relationships with some family members, which can be helpful for a young person struggling to live independently.

“There are a lot of mental health difficulties that impact on family conflict so for example, with parents AND young people there are a lot of severe and enduring difficulties. By the time I get referrals generally it’s a complex case, so you would get young people and parents suffering a long term depression, anxiety, self esteem issues, which are also impacted by drug and alcohol abuse. And that impacts on conflict because people are just that much more tired, they are much more frustrated and generally finding life difficult. We have separate one to one sessions if the young person is homeless or at risk of being homeless and we also have one to one sessions with parents separately and

it enables people to have a space where they are able to think about what has happened. They can stand back and say “actually, well, it’s gone too far” and very often it doesn’t get to the process of mediation.” Amanda Singh. Family Mental Health mediator (Smith & Deutschman, 2010).

In their Impact Report (2010/11) Alone in London reported the following outcomes from their family mediation work:

- 142 young people received the support of a Family Mediator to help manage their home situation and their relationship with family.
- 36 young people were supported to return home or remain with their families.
- 97 parents were supported to resolve conflict and rebuild their relationship with their child.
- 106 young people reported improved family relationships since receiving support.
- 124 young people/parents reported improved conflict resolution and communication skills.
- 163 young people/parents reported now knowing where to go to seek help if they find themselves unable to cope.

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Alone in London has an excellent website with information and resources that could inform efforts to adapt their model:

**Email** [alone@als.org.uk](mailto:alone@als.org.uk)  
**Web** <http://www.aloneinlondon.org/>

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## Shelter Diversion

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Shelter diversion refers to the provision of alternative temporary housing options, supports and interventions designed to reduce the likelihood that young people will rely on emergency shelters. There are compelling reasons to consider strategies that help young people avoid this route. Because most small communities do not have emergency shelters, moving into one often means not only leaving home, but leaving—and losing—one’s community. This invariably has a negative impact on an individual’s social capital, in that the natural resources and supports (family, friends, teachers and other adults) that might help someone move forward and avoid longer term homelessness become strained and weakened.

A second thing to consider is that most emergency shelters for youth bring together a mix of young people, some who are new to the streets and some who have been on the streets for years and who have very complex challenges relating to mental health, addictions, criminal involvement etc. that are not being adequately dealt with. The challenges for shelter staff are considerable and preventing young people who are new to the streets from exposure to crime, sexual exploitation, violence and addictions can be a difficult challenge. There is every reason to want to help young people avoid becoming mired in street youth culture. Since many young people who use shelters are fleeing difficult, conflictual and potentially traumatic situations, life in an emergency shelter may be experienced by some as ‘freedom’ and a relief. Without adequate support to address the underlying issues that created the crisis, or to help move forward into housing with appropriate supports, it is all too easy for young people to become stuck in the street youth life, surrounded by other youth who may help them meet daily needs (food, companionship, survival skills), but who have weak capacity to really help them move forward with their lives. While for many young people who become homeless, the relationships they establish on the streets are important in reminding them that they can be liked, they can trust people and they aren’t alone, in many cases these relationships can involve exploitation and be quite limiting if they undermine people’s confidence to leave the streets.

The underlying goal of shelter diversion, then, is to help young people transition to stability and prevent homelessness. This is best done by providing young people with locally-based supports, drawing on the resources that exist in the community and by giving young people temporary housing options (with extended family, friends, religious institutions etc.). This allows time to work through the problems that led to homelessness, ideally with case management support.

A program model for shelter diversion should integrate other elements of early intervention, including common assessment, case management and family reconnection. Again, as part of a ‘system of care’, there should be an effort to develop the program drawing on mainstream supports in the education and health care systems. We need to do what we can to keep young people in their communities and close to home (if it is safe to do so) where they can draw on their natural supports.

# Youth Reconnect

RAFT: Niagara Resource Service for Youth



**Youth Reconnect** is an early intervention shelter diversion program developed in Southern Ontario's Niagara Region. This region includes rural areas, many small towns and a mid-sized city, St. Catharines. The outcome of a collaborative pilot project involving youth homeless service providers, the goal of this community-based prevention program is to help homeless and at-risk youth, from both urban and rural areas, stay in their communities and obtain needed supports. "The initiative helps clients access resources and increases their self-sufficiency, by assisting adolescents to maintain school attendance, secure housing and develop a social safety net in their home community" (RAFT, 2012:1). The desire is to prevent them from frequenting youth shelters in St. Catharines or Toronto, by which time their exposure to a range of risks, including addictions, crime and sexual exploitation, may make helping them move on with their lives that much more difficult.

**Program Design.** The program developed as a partnership between a broad range of service providers. The program targets young people between the ages of 16 and 19, who are referred by high schools, community partners, social service agencies and police. The young person is then met by a Reconnect worker to assess their needs and develop a community-based plan of action designed to help them draw on local supports, enhance protective factors, reduce risk and stay in school. If they need crisis housing, they are transported to one of the local hostels on a temporary basis until arrangements are made for them to move back into their community.

## Typical program interventions include:

- Helping youth remain in schools whenever possible by securing living arrangements.
- Working directly with individual schools and school boards to develop plans for youth returning to school after dropping out or creating education plans to help at-risk youth remain in school.
- Connecting youth with financial support programs and stable housing to ensure youth are able to continue with their education.
- Securing affordable housing and a stabilized income by reducing access barriers and providing advocacy when needed.
- Linking youth to specialized services (i.e. mental health, addictions, family counselling) as required.
- Directly assisting youth to develop a social safety net to support them in the future and to help them as they move forward from the program.

"By creating a localized support network and keeping youth within their home communities, the youth reconnect initiative is able to help youth remain connected to their communities, with the support they need, instead of forcing youth to relocate to a larger urban area, where they are more susceptible to engaging in high risk behaviours" (RAFT, 2012: 2).

## → Shelter Diversion

An interesting model of shelter diversion for youth is respite accommodation. The goal of respite housing, which has been experimented with and implemented in several communities in the UK (sometimes referred to as ‘Time Out’ housing) and is becoming more popular in the United States through Host Home programs, is to provide young people with temporary, short-term accommodation with lots of supports. It is considered particularly appropriate for young people under the age of 18, is intended as an alternative to the youth shelter system, gives young people a break from their family, or temporary shelter while looking for a place to stay and also helps young people avoid getting caught up in street youth culture. The actual service delivery model and approach to accommodation can take different forms—it can involve small, purpose-built facilities (similar in some ways to shelters), but more often, young people will be placed in households that have a spare room. In some cases, the hosts are volunteers, in other cases, they are paid.

The development of respite housing stems from the knowledge that young people sometimes become homeless because an unresolved family conflict can erupt into a crisis. Temperatures rise, angry words are said and parents ask the young person to leave, or conversely, the youth makes the decision to leave home. In such cases (and in particular where there may be family conflict, but no history of physical, sexual or emotional abuse) a ‘time out’ space is needed, where young people and their families can work on repairing relations so that the youth can return home, or conversely, provides them with accommodation while they work out longer-term housing support.

Respite accommodation, then, is designed to provide:

“safe, high quality accommodation for a short period of time to give them and their families a ‘breather’ and provide a supportive environment for all parties to rebuild their emotional resilience and renegotiate relationships”

(Quilgars et al., 2011:8).

When in respite housing, young people are typically provided with night clothing and two meals a day. After the first night’s stay, youth are offered case management support by a local agency, where they work on plans that include family reconnection (and potentially mediation), as well as life skills. In order to ensure the safety and effectiveness of respite programs involving stays in private homes, there are robust recruitment and placement procedures (Smith & Duckett, 2010:12). Host families are trained and supported and the program operates with an established Quality Standards Assessment in place.



### Nightstop

Depaul UK operates 40 Nightstop services throughout the United Kingdom, working with over 500 volunteer hosts. Young people aged 16-25 are able to stay with an adult or family for up to 21 days.

“Nightstop provides an opportunity for a young person who is homeless to stay with a volunteer, in their home, whilst family reconciliation work is undertaken and/or more settled accommodation secured. Young people are given their own room, a toiletry pack and can have their clothes washed if needed. They are also given an evening meal and breakfast. They are normally asked to vacate the host’s property during the day; at what time is a decision for the individual hosts.” (Insley, 2011:7)

Depaul did an extensive evaluation of the Nightstop program, which in 2010 provided 8166 bed nights for 2033 young people, most of whom were fleeing family conflict and/or were thrown out of their homes. While many of the young people who came in to the program were ‘couch surfing’ directly prior, 11% were sleeping rough (absolutely homeless). In terms of housing outcomes after staying at Nightstop, 21% returned to their families, 36% moved into supported housing, 14% obtained private accommodation, 11% moved into social housing and 14% moved in with a friend.

For more information, see: Insley, E. (2011b) **Staying Safe: An Evaluation of Nightstop Services**

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## → Shelter Diversion

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St. Basil's "Time Out" project in Birmingham (UK) makes use of one of their housing units to provide young people with a place to stay, usually for a period of 2 weeks. During that time, they get 10 hours of support each week from a staff member and engage in family mediation. An evaluation of this program identified that 78% of young people returned home after two weeks, reported in Quilgars et al., 2011. As one program manager explains:

"Our focus is to assist young people who present with crisis housing need as a result of family conflict an opportunity to spend some time away from the family home—a period of two weeks to not only learn life skills and independent living skills but also to engage in mediation with their parents or caregiver which is very much focused on them returning home in a planned and safe way. After the two weeks stay with us, ultimately our goal is for them to return home, but if not it is to ensure that they have thought through planning the process of moving out of the family home."

(Marsha Blake, Prevention Services manager (Smith & Deutschman, 2010)).

In North America, Host Home programs have been implemented in many jurisdictions. The State of Minnesota has developed Host Home programs in many areas of the state and significantly, in the Twin Cities they have a program targeting LGBTQ youth. It is a particularly effective model in rural areas, especially those that lack emergency shelters, because it allows young people to stay in their community (Baker Collins, 2013). In the area surrounding Brainerd, Minnesota, for instance, Lutheran Social Services have recruited and trained many adults to provide Host Homes. When a young person becomes homeless, they are matched up with adults or families (who are paid a small stipend). A youth worker usually meets with the youth and the host the first night, in order to help the young person settle in and begin the process of determining next steps. In the context of family conflict they negotiate a 'cooling off' period; although the family is informed the next day that the young person is in a host home the whereabouts of the home is not disclosed. The next steps can include family reconnection or efforts to help the young person find appropriate accommodations and supports.

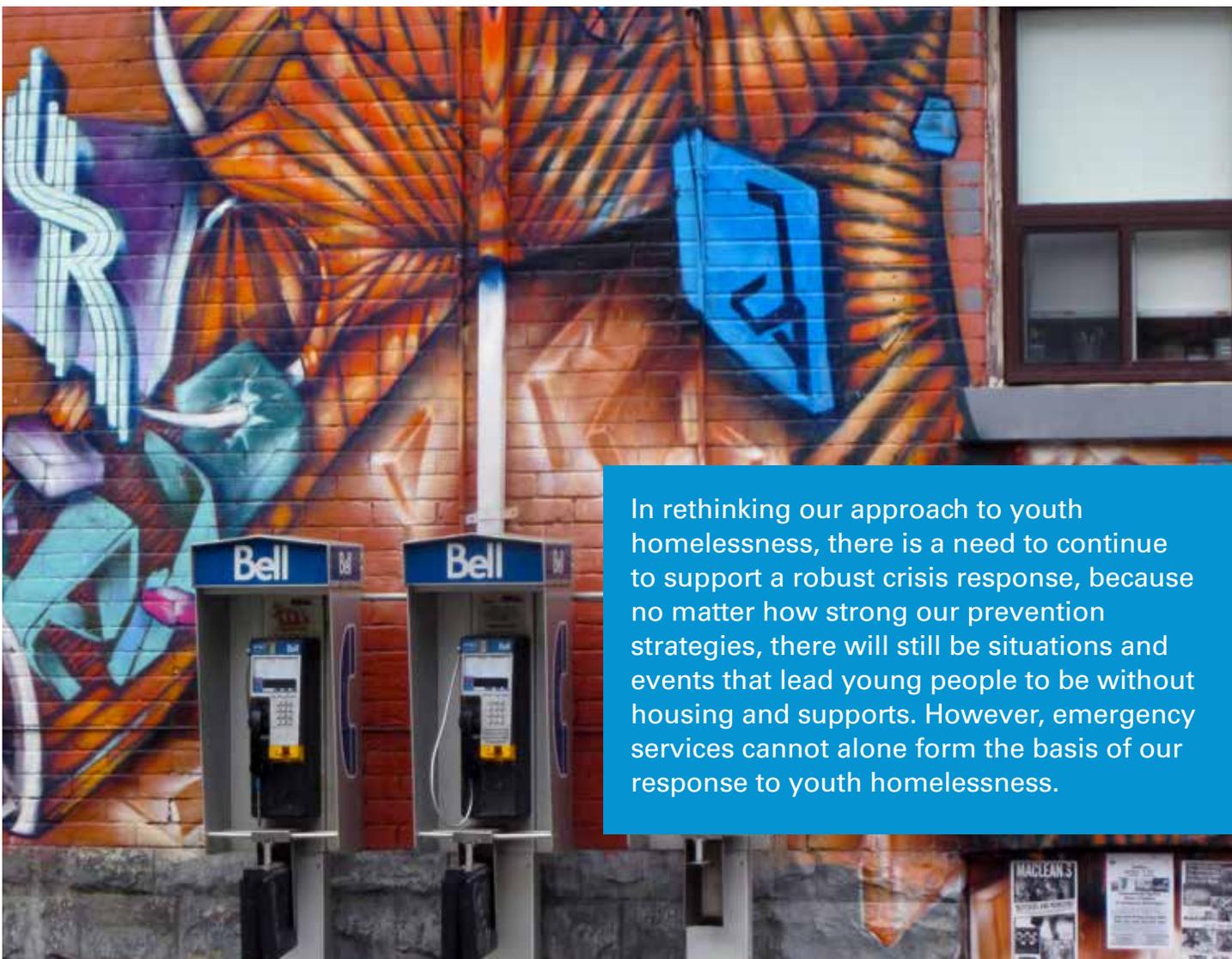
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## Conclusion

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The prevention of youth homelessness should be central to any strategy to address the problem. The framework presented here is intended to highlight key points for intervention. The need to work with young people, their families, schools and other community supports is necessary, in order to avoid the spiral into longer term homelessness. While the goal of prevention is most certainly to reduce the likelihood that young people wind up in emergency shelters, the reality is that for some young people, this will still continue to happen. At the same time, while efforts to help young people stay at home with their families are important, it is also recognized that for many this is not an option, for safety reasons or simply because there is no home to return to. As such, the models of prevention presented here must be embedded in a broader strategy that includes an emergency response, but also models of accommodation and support designed to help young people make the successful transition to adulthood.

## Retooling the System



In rethinking our approach to youth homelessness, there is a need to continue to support a robust crisis response, because no matter how strong our prevention strategies, there will still be situations and events that lead young people to be without housing and supports. However, emergency services cannot alone form the basis of our response to youth homelessness.

Emergency services are a key and important feature of the crisis response to youth homelessness. In Canada and the United States, this crisis response typically includes emergency shelters, day programs, outreach, employment/education and other supports, designed to build connections, alleviate the worst consequences of being homeless and help young people move towards independence. There is incredible variety and diversity in the mandates and structures of emergency services and supports, broadly based on funding structures, policy

frameworks and the philosophical orientation of the governing organization. Age mandates vary (some serve young people aged 16-18; others as young as 12 and up to the age of 25), as does the targeted client group (most are mixed gender, but some will serve males or females exclusively), the size and capacity of different services, the range of supports offered and the hours of operation. Many communities do not have any youth-focused crisis response at all, forcing young people into the adult system, if that exists, or to leave their communities all together.

## What is a Retooled Emergency Response?

So when we say we need to retool the system, this is not a criticism of the emergency sector, per se, but rather a call to reorient the emergency response so that its mandate is to support prevention-based models of early intervention and strategies to help move young people into housing, with appropriate supports. In the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia—all countries that have been grappling with a large homelessness problem much longer than Canada—there has been a paradigm shift in the response to homelessness that involved retooling their emergency services. This has meant providing a new policy and funding framework that rewards the emergency sector for providing longer-term solutions for people who experience homelessness, rather than for outputs such as how many beds are filled, or how many people use a day program, for example.

A retooled and repurposed emergency sector goes hand in hand with a commitment to end homelessness and will:

- Ensure that all people who come into contact with the homelessness sector are assessed and provided with supports to either return home or move into housing as quickly as possible.
- Adopt a client-centred case management approach for individuals and families that enter the system and ensure they are tracked as they navigate their way out of the system.
- Fund and reward service providers for focusing on prevention and rapid rehousing as a service priority and make the goal of emergency services a shorter experience of homelessness.
- Integrate 'Housing First' and/or transitional housing supports when working with chronic and long-term homeless clients.
- Develop a strong outreach focus to bring in young people who are not connected to services and make rapid rehousing a priority for them.
- Invest in smaller and dispersed shelter environments that provide individual rooms with locked doors.

In retooling the crisis response in both the UK and Australia, emergency shelters are not seen as distinct from either preventive approaches or strategies that help people move into stable housing, but rather, they are geared to facilitate these outcomes. In other words, while in Canada we often see the homelessness sector as somewhat discrete from both the places people come from and where they are going, emergency services elsewhere are framed explicitly as tools to support prevention and rapid rehousing and to help people move into independent living—and stay there. Emergency shelters must be considered as part of a continuum of care, with crisis services engaged in and supporting aspects of, prevention and early intervention described in the previous section, but also becoming a pathway to a supported accommodation model, so to speak. The crisis response, then, is not distinct from prevention approaches and accommodation, but works to support them. Below are some key elements of an effective emergency response.

Retooling the system means reorienting the emergency response so that its mandate is to support prevention-based models of early intervention and strategies to help move young people into housing, with appropriate supports.

### Key Elements

- A Shorter Stays in Emergency Shelters
- B Integration into a 'System of Care'
- C Go Smaller
- D Zero Discharge into Homelessness
- E Day Programs and Case Management
- F Outreach
- G Mental Health Supports
- H Harm Reduction
- I An Anti-Discrimination Framework & Practice
- J Advertising Legal & Justice Issues

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# Key Elements

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## A

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### Shorter Stays in Emergency Shelters

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The research on homeless shelters for adults, families and youth identifies a great deal of variation in terms of the built environment and elements of design, the relationship of the shelter to the community and surrounding environment and aspects of service (Hurtubise et al., 2009; Sandalak et al., 2008; Karabanow, 2004). Shelters can and do play a role in the response to youth homelessness:

“In addition to providing services to meet basic needs, such as meals and a place to stay, shelters can offer youth opportunities for supportive relationships, engagement and empowerment that support healthy developmental processes impeded within their other life contexts.”

(Heinz, 2013:279)

We do know a lot about shelters, but within a reimagined response to youth homelessness, what should the role of the emergency shelter be and how is it situated within a system of care?

Ideally, the focus should continue to be providing crisis support, however a stay in an emergency shelter should be temporary and short-term. The notion of ‘emergency’ shelter or refuge means that people receive safe accommodation during a crisis and then move on. A reasonable goal for shelter providers is a stay of less than a month and this target is often a feature of Ten Year Plans to end homelessness. The Calgary Ten Year Plan, for instance, sets the ambitious target for a maximum average stay in emergency shelters to be less than seven days by 2018 (Calgary Committee to End Homelessness, 2008:12).

Research from the United States shows that the majority of young people who utilize shelters are in fact there for a short time (temporarily disconnected), but there are also young people who get trapped in the system and stay for much longer (“unstably connected” and “chronically disconnected”). These youth, though smaller in number, utilize more resources and beds.

There is plenty of research (including research from Canada) that attests to the negative impact of long-term youth homelessness (Public interest, 2009; Gaetz et al., 2010), including declining health, exposure to violence and exploitation, depression and becoming mired in ‘street life.’

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## → (A) Shorter Stays in Emergency Shelters

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The 'move on' principle should be enforced, so what gets in the way of change?

- **Lack of an integrated systems response.** The flow into shelters is not reduced by effective prevention and the flow out is hampered by a lack of affordable and appropriate housing options.
- **Limitations to the service delivery model of many youth shelters.** Getting young people to move forward and get out of the sector is an ongoing challenge when emergency services focus for the most part on "three hots and a cot" (i.e. three meals a day and a place to sleep).
- **Beliefs about the intractability of homelessness.** In some shelter contexts, staff may hold the belief that the problems facing some individuals (the chronically homeless in particular) are so significant that getting them into stable housing is not a 'realistic' goal.
- **Misguided funding and policy frameworks.** In many jurisdictions in Canada, shelter operators are rewarded for how many people they house (as they are paid on a per diem basis), rather than on their prevention strategies, or how many individuals they help move out of homelessness.

There are lessons we can learn from other countries that have begun the process of retooling their emergency shelters. In both Australia and the United Kingdom, there has been an evolution in how they think about youth homeless shelters. In Australia, there was a movement to reform the shelter system for homeless youth in the 1980s, as part of the creation and implementation of the **Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP)**. Central to this shift was a move from emergency shelters conceived of as 'refuges', to the development of 'crisis accommodation services'. This reworking of the shelter system allowed for flexibility in service delivery models in order to respond more effectively to the diverse range of client needs and situations. The crisis accommodation services were incorporated into a broader continuum of care framework that drew more explicitly on an understanding of young people's needs rather than simply the provision of emergency shelter. While young people can stay as long as they need to, staff focus on keeping the stays as short as possible while working to help young people find suitable accommodation. Key to this approach is a service delivery model that focuses on:

- Incorporating the social and recreational needs of young people.
- Working to connect young people to family and/or to develop positive relationships.
- Assisting and educating young people to develop the necessary social and living skills.
- Connecting young people to a wider range of community support services which meet their needs and which assist young people to participate positively in the community.

# B

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## Integration into a ‘System of Care’

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Emergency services, where they exist, should be properly integrated within a ‘system of care’. This means that in communities that have multiple service providers, agencies must work collaboratively and in an integrated way. It means that steps must be taken to ensure that emergency services are able to draw on the support of mainstream services (health care, mental health, addictions), which is sometimes a major challenge. Finally, it means that emergency services should not be considered separate or distinct from, but rather, properly embedded within an integrated systems approach that highlights prevention and accommodation with supports. In fact, key elements of early intervention practices described in the previous section (common assessment, case management and family reunification) should also be central to an emergency response, with the goal of helping young people avoid longer term involvement with more traditional emergency services.

However—and this cannot be stressed enough—you cannot dramatically alter the emergency response unless you also put in place strong prevention programs and ensure that there are options for accommodation available to young people. If there is not available and appropriate affordable housing for young people (with supports if necessary), you cannot task the emergency sector with making stays in shelters shorter.

In the end, integrating young people into a system of care also demands some form of coordinated assessment to determine the needs of young people and a case management approach that helps them navigate systems.

However—and this cannot be stressed enough—you cannot dramatically alter the emergency response unless you also put in place strong prevention programs and ensure that there are options for accommodation available to young people.

## C

## Go Smaller

Smaller shelters, though potentially having higher operating costs because of staff/client ratios, offer a number of advantages. First, there is greater flexibility in allowing for tailored service models that can potentially target youth sub-populations. Second, the scale means that a different kind of work can be accomplished with young people and shelters can more effectively target sub-populations, be they females, LGBTQ youth, or Aboriginal youth, for instance. Third and perhaps most importantly, it means that shelters can be dispersed and located in different communities. Large youth shelters often meet local resistance (NIMBYism). As a result, most are located in downtown areas of larger cities, meaning that to access them, youth have to leave their home communities.

In Australia today, emergency youth shelters are typically much smaller than in Canada, with six to eight persons per shelter. In many shelters, capital investments have been made to redevelop facilities so that youth are provided with more independence and safety within the building including private bathroom and bedrooms (Leebeek et al., 2005). Ideally, each young person has their own room with a door they can lock (Walsh et al., 2009). These smaller shelters tend to be well furnished and in some cases, young people are able to take their furnishings with them when they move out. It should be pointed out that there is recognition that such a reform of the emergency 'refuge' model could not take place without a concurrent commitment to mid-term and long-term accommodation solutions for youth.

In the United Kingdom, there has been a similar focus on reforming emergency shelters. There are two key and interrelated differences that distinguish their approach to emergency shelter from that of Canada. The first is that there is a more general acceptance of case management and supports as a central feature of life in shelters, with attention paid to life skills training. This kind of approach is most effective, however, when there is recognition of the importance of relationship building between staff and clients (Jones et al., 2001; Pleace et al., 2008; Quilgars, 2000; Social Inclusion Unit, 2005). The second difference, which is related to the first, is that emergency services are more directly oriented to helping young people move on as quickly as possible. Key lessons learned from these examples include:

- Recognition that size matters: While 'generic hostel provision' (non-specialized) may work for some young people, it is argued that more specialized services, with a smaller number of beds and a higher staff ratio, are seen to be more appropriate for young people with high needs (mental health or addictions issues, for instance).
- Case management support.
- Differentiated shelter options—for instance, accommodation for young women separate from young men.
- Shelter programming focused on positive youth development.
- Integration of shelters into a 'system' or 'continuum' of care.

**“Go smaller, fight for the money, make them nice places to be. Don’t make them austere. Don’t have a bare mattress. Make it look nice. Invest in living space, good quality furniture, nice flooring, everything that makes it nice. These poor kids are coming from horrible places often, so make it nice for them.”**

*(Narelle Clay, Chairperson, Homelessness Australia).*

# D

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## Zero Discharge into Homelessness

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All institutions have rules and regulations outlining acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and emergency shelters are no different (Hurtubise et al., 2009; Neale et al., 1997; Roy et al., 2000). There should always be an expectation of compliance with rules. However, rule breaking should never become a reason to discharge someone into homelessness. Possible reasons for discharge are many and varied and are based on the rules and culture of the institution. This can include breaking curfew, being intoxicated, acts of violence and aggression, talking back to staff and in the case of some faith-based shelters, moral transgressions such as getting an abortion. In other cases, young people are discharged because the shelter in question has a limit on how long someone can stay.

There are compelling reasons to find alternatives. Young people who are homeless are already at-risk. Discharging them into homelessness can increase risk and makes the sector part of the problem, rather than the solution. Many young people who become homeless have a history of institutional care, in which rule-bound environments with trip-wires can increase conflict and alienation and undermine self-esteem and produce feelings of failure. Additionally, discharging is often an institutional response to managing people in a chaotic environment, rather than being a well thought out principle of practice.

It does not have to be this way. Many organizations have recognized the need to work differently. For instance, the **Boys and Girls Club of Calgary (BGCC)**, following one of the core principles of the Calgary Homeless Foundation, have adopted a “zero discharge into homelessness” policy for all of their eight programs serving homeless youth. These programs range from an emergency shelter, to prevention programs, to transitional housing and Housing First. Katie Davies, BGCC manager says “We operate on the principle that housing and shelter is a human right. Youth do not earn home or shelter through good behaviour” (personal communication, 2013). Shifting to this approach can be a challenging change management exercise, but it can be done and would become part of a more respectful—and less punitive—approach to working with young people in crisis.

Young people who are homeless are already at-risk. Discharging them into homelessness can increase risk and makes the sector part of the problem, rather than the solution.

“We operate on the principle that housing and shelter is a human right. Youth do not earn home or shelter through good behaviour”

(Katie Davis, Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary., 2013)

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# E

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## Day Programs and Case Management

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"Many young people who use day services may do so to meet needs that have nothing to do with the agenda of the agency or service provider (for instance, meeting friends). At the same time they may—for very good reasons—be alienated from and distrustful of adults, including those who work in day programs, however well-meaning. This may mean that organizations and staff have to be flexible, offer young people different ways to engage and be patient in building relationships."

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Day programming is an important part of the emergency response to homeless youth. It is often where young people make first contact with the sector. It can be a place where young people meet others, obtain food and other material resources, rest and escape bad weather. It is a place where young people can engage adults and get help and support. These are all important resources for young people, especially those who are absolutely homeless.

However, day programs can be much more and can serve several important functions in supporting young people. First, they should support—and ideally be incorporated within—other services for homeless youth. They should be part of an integrated system, rather than a stand-alone service. In this sense, they can operate as a hub and referral service, helping young people link to the supports they need, either by bringing those services to the young people, or by helping them access external services and supports. Second, the focus of engagement with young people should be purposeful. The day program should be more than simply a place to 'hang out'; it should engage youth through activities and practices that help them move forward with their goals. A client-centred case management approach is recommended, so that the work is supported, and driven, by what the young person determines to be significant.

Many young people who use day services may do so to meet needs that have nothing to do with the agenda of the agency or service provider (for instance, meeting friends). At the same time they may—for very good reasons—be alienated from and distrustful of adults, including those who work in day programs, however well-meaning. This may mean that organizations and staff have to be flexible, offer young people different ways to engage and be patient in building relationships. This does not mean that day programs should lose sight of the overall goal, which is to help young people move off the streets.

# F

## Outreach

Street outreach involves moving outside the walls of the agency to engage young people who may be disconnected and alienated not only from mainstream services and supports, but from the services targeting homeless youth, as well. This is incredibly important work designed to help establish supportive relationships, give young people advice and support and hopefully enhance the possibility that they will access necessary services and supports that will help them move off the streets.

Building strong relationships is essential, because there may be legitimate barriers that prevent young people from accessing services, including unsatisfying or even problematic experiences of child protection services, homeless shelters or mental health facilities. This work can take time. For many young people with addictions issues, with pets, with partners they refuse to part with, or who are underage and fearful of being turned over to child protection authorities, there may be real or perceived barriers to accessing existing services. It may also be the case that the young person has simply ‘slipped through the cracks’ and is unaware of the range of services and supports that are out there.

Outreach strategies require the development of an understanding of the individual circumstances and needs of each youth, as well as cultural barriers that may prevent young people from accessing mainstream services for homeless youth (Aboriginal youth, for instance). This means a personalized assessment of risk behaviours and circumstances. Through the development of positive relationships, the attainment of the larger goal of helping young people access the services and supports they need in order to help them move forward with their lives can be achieved. Outreach that merely helps support young people who are living independently but without any shelter may be a necessary and important first step in relationship building, but the overall goal of street outreach should be tied to the larger goal of helping young people move off the streets as quickly as possible. In order to achieve this goal, outreach workers need to be familiar with and have access to, a range of mainstream and community services. Outreach services that are run by an agency whose goal is simply to link the person to that agency, are not seen as effective. Workers need to be seen as doing the work of the sector and not simply of the agency they work for. This requires a higher degree of interagency collaboration.

There are several key challenges to successful outreach. First, street outreach involves working with visibly homeless youth living on the streets—there needs to be outreach strategies for the invisible homeless, that is, young people who are couch surfing or living without shelter in hard to reach and remote places, etc. Second, outreach can be challenging because young people are not obliged to talk with or otherwise engage workers, in the way they might have to within the walls of an agency. This means outreach can be slow and the results can sometimes feel ambiguous. There is some evidence that a ‘stages of change’ approach to conducting outreach is more effective, since the intervention can be tied to a young person’s accepted willingness to move forward with their lives. Finally, many young people will avoid going to mainstream shelters and day programs for good reasons—they are afraid, they have pets (for company and safety) and staying in shelters may mean disrupting important and close relationships they see as vital to surviving on the streets. These conditions in fact suggest that when possible, the emergency shelter system must demonstrate flexibility when it comes to maintaining important relationships, networks of support and even pets.

In many places in Canada, there is an understanding that outreach is important in order to access hard-to-reach young people, though it is not always connected to an overt and concerted effort to end homelessness. Key features of youth outreach in the UK and Australia are useful in conceptualizing how to make this link:

- Outreach is not limited to the visibly homeless. An effort should be made to connect with ‘couch surfers’ and to get into institutional settings where young people may be housed, but are still ‘at risk’ (see educational programs sited above).
- Outreach is often tied to more aggressive efforts to reduce ‘rough sleeping’, as they call it in the UK.
- Rather than a more passive form of engagement, outreach tends to involve ‘intake’ and case management support.

## G

## Mental Health Supports

Addressing the mental health needs of young people continues to be a major challenge for those working in the homelessness sector. As discussed above, the percentage of young people who experience serious mental health issues is 10-20% and the situation for homeless youth is even worse (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2012). In one study, approximately 40% of homeless youth identified themselves as having mental health issues, with that number increasing with length of time on the streets (70% amongst those homeless more than four years). This includes not only serious mental health conditions such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, but the rigours of life on the streets mean that street youth are more likely to exhibit very high levels of depression, anxiety (obsessive/compulsive and phobic), hostility, paranoia and psychoticism, for instance. The elevated rates of depression, suicidal ideation and other psychiatric disorders in homeless youth has been demonstrated by others (McCay, 2009; McCay & Aiello, 2013; Kidd, 2004; 2013; Boivan, 2005; Kidd & Kral, 2002; Leslie et al., 2002) and this risk is particularly pronounced among gay, bisexual and transgendered youth (Gattis, 2009; Cochran et al., 2002).

There is a common perception within the youth homelessness sector that mental health problems are becoming more prevalent amongst the street youth population. While there is no evidence of this<sup>15</sup>, it is worth noting that accessing appropriate care and support for their clients from mainstream services continues to be a challenge for those working with street youth in many communities. Research in Toronto showed that amongst youth who self-identified as having mental health problems, over half reported they cannot access the mental health services they need (Yonge Street Mission, 2009). The literature also indicates that young people who have had significant 'system involvement' experience fragmentation and discontinuation, of mental health care as they transition between systems (Munson et al., 2011).

The inadequacy of mental health supports absolutely demonstrates the need for an integrated 'system of care' approach. Rather than recreate mental health systems within the sector, there is a need for more effective, seamless (and respectful) collaboration and involvement by mainstream service providers. Unfortunately, the homelessness sector typically lacks the power and influence to shape how the health care system operates. This is where regional health authorities and provincial governments must mandate an effective mental health response to youth homelessness.

In one study, approximately 40% of homeless youth identified themselves as having mental health issues, with that number increasing with length of time on the streets (70% amongst those homeless more than four years).



**40 - 70%**  
of homeless youth have  
mental health issues  
compared to  
**10 - 20%** of housed youth

<sup>15</sup> This may simply be a reflection of growing awareness amongst staff (and Canadians in general) about mental health problems and staff now 'recognize' what were formerly interpreted as behavioural challenges, as mental disorders.

# H

## Harm Reduction

For many, but not all, young people who become homeless, the use of different substances, both legal (alcohol and cigarettes) and illegal, is common. In some cases, substance use can be highly problematic and addictions can ensue. It is worth pointing out that while addictions can sometimes be a cause of youth homelessness, for many youth the use of substances is a response to the stresses and trauma of homelessness and street life.

There is a vast body of literature that addresses the addictions issues of young people who become homeless (Adlaf et al., 1999; Roy et al., 2009). While many services for homeless youth adopt an 'abstinence only' model, it is argued here that harm reduction models should be incorporated into our response to youth homelessness.

Harm reduction is still controversial in many communities, in part because it is not well understood. Harm reduction is defined as an approach aimed at "reducing the risks and harmful effects associated with substance use and addictive behaviours for the individual, the community and society as a whole. It is deemed a realistic, pragmatic, humane and successful approach to addressing issues of substance use. Recognizing that abstinence may be neither a realistic or a desirable goal." (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, Harm Reduction, 2014). It is considered to be a realistic and pragmatic approach to addressing the negative consequences of substance use and is based on recognition that abstinence may be neither a realistic or desired goal for some users. From a harm reduction perspective, substance use is understood in terms of its impact on health and well-being, rather than simply a moral or criminal issue. People can, do and will continue to use substances and so the focus is to ensure that it does not create harm for the individual or those around them.

**Harm Reduction is a realistic and pragmatic approach to addressing the negative consequences of substance use and is based on recognition that abstinence may be neither a realistic or desired goal for some users. From a harm reduction perspective, substance use is understood in terms of its impact on health and well-being, rather than simply a moral or criminal issue.**

Many people incorrectly interpret a harm reduction approach as promoting, supporting or –minimally–being indifferent to substance use and ignoring those who want to quit. This is clearly a misunderstanding of the concept and it is worth pointing out that harm reduction does not exist in opposition to abstinence. That is, because harm reduction is invariably a client-centered approach that respects choice, it in fact incorporates abstinence as an option for some young people, either in the present or in the future. Choice is really key here: some young people will desire a harm reduction environment, while others will absolutely want abstinence-based services. Providing young people with a range of options is the true approach to harm reduction.

There is considerable evidence of the effectiveness of harm reduction (Rhodes & Hedrich, 2010; Marlatt & Witkiewitz, 2010; Buccieri, 2013a; Kirst & Erikson, 2013). There is also growing acceptance of harm reduction as an important tool and strategy for working with homeless youth (or youth at risk) who are struggling with addictions. Moreover, many Canadian communities such as Toronto and Vancouver have emerged as leaders in terms of the practice of Harm Reduction.



Eva's Satellite is a low-barrier youth shelter in Toronto that targets young people with addictions issues. Through the implementation of a comprehensive harm reduction strategy, the Satellite aims to support youth in taking: "crucial steps toward rebuilding their lives by receiving counselling, life skills training and participating in healthy recreation programs" (Eva's website). The Satellite partners with other agencies (including Inner City Health Associates and Central Toronto Youth Services) to provide innovative programming and services designed to respond to the needs of youth who actively use drugs and alcohol. Some services include: health care, a clinical program, detox, peer and recreation programs and community outreach.

For more information, go to the Eva's Satellite website, or contact Evas at: [info@evas.ca](mailto:info@evas.ca)

# Harm Reduction at Shout Clinic

Toronto, ON



Shout Clinic, a community health centre in Toronto, has had a long history of providing comprehensive services and supports to young people who are homeless and who are not well served by the rest of the service system. The clinic operates with a harm reduction philosophy and working with other community-based agencies has supported the implementation of innovative approaches. In 2010, Shout Clinic conducted a comprehensive study of young people who are homeless and their use of drugs (Barnaby et al., 2010). They found that while young people who come to the clinic are more likely to use illicit substances, they also were committed to improving their own health and well-being. Their research with young people reinforced the critical role of harm reduction and other health and social services in supporting youth who are homeless.

## Several key components of harm reduction programming have been identified by Shout Clinic in Toronto and include:

- On-site and mobile harm reduction distribution programs (e.g. needle exchanges).
- Access to safer drug use equipment (e.g. injection equipment), safer sex supplies, body art supplies (e.g. safer body piercing kits) and biohazard containers for safe disposal of used equipment.
- Safe injection and consumption sites.
- Overdose prevention and treatment (e.g. Naloxone treatment).
- Methadone maintenance and drug substitution and other models of treatment programs.
- Outreach, education, counselling and health promotion aimed at maintaining and enhancing health and well-being; and the prevention of substance use related harms.
- Peer programming, support groups and user unions for people who use substances.
- The provision of medical and mental health services.
- Access to basic needs such as food, clothing, drinking water and shelter/housing.
- Referrals to shelters, housing, health care, counselling, detoxification, drug treatment, vocational and other services and programs.
- The inclusion of people who use substances in the design and planning of harm-reduction programs, strategies and policies and drug law reforms.
- Advocacy, policy development and law reform.

(Barnaby, Penn & Erickson, 2010)

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## An Anti-Discrimination Framework and Practice

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There is great diversity within the homeless youth population. As discussed above, some sub-populations are over-represented, including males, Aboriginal youth and LGBTQ youth. Why does this matter? Although homelessness is stigmatizing for all young people who experience it, many are doubly and triply marginalized due to racism, sexism and homophobia. In fact, discrimination is an identifiable cause of homelessness. Many young people continue to experience its negative impact once on the streets, from other young people, adults and unfortunately, from many service providers.

If emergency services are the last refuge for such youth—they have no where else to go—then it is incumbent upon the sector to ensure that service providers do not further contribute to this marginalization. No organization should accept policies or practices that are homophobic or racist, for instance. As an example, transgendered youth should be able to expect the full rights, respect and the protection that they are most certainly entitled to. Young women—many of whom have experienced sexual exploitation and assault—should not be forced into services that include mixed gender clientele, as this may impact on their safety and well-being. Emergency services, then, should not only institute anti-discrimination policies, but should ensure that they are practiced, which means training and support for staff. The first rule of emergency supports should be to "do no harm." Youth homelessness is in many ways about marginalization; the crisis response should not further entrench this.



# J

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## Addressing Legal and Justice Issues

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One of the major challenges of working with homeless youth is addressing their legal and justice issues, the range of which are varied and complex. This means not only dealing with their encounters with police, the courts and corrections as a result of their illegal activities, but also their experiences as victims of crime (Gaetz, 2004; Gaetz et al., 2010). It also means addressing difficulties they experience in dealing with unscrupulous employers and landlords, as well as helping them address issues relating to family law and immigration. Solid legal support is often difficult to come by and there are usually profound limitations to the kinds of support that legal aid clinics can provide. An interesting model of support is provided by Justice for Children and Youth in Toronto (see next page).

Providing support for homeless youth means more than individual intervention and advocacy; it must also redefine the role and use of law enforcement with regards to youth homelessness. This is said with full acknowledgement of the defined role that police services, courts and corrections have in our society. Unfortunately, one of the consequences of the rise of homelessness as a visible ‘problem’ is that in many communities, law enforcement becomes a strategy to address what is essentially a social and economic issue. Calls for police to issue tickets or ‘move people along’ often go hand in hand with legislation that redefines common activities that homeless people engage in—like sleeping in parks, or panhandling, for instance—as illegal. Such policies and practices, meant to render homelessness less ‘visible’ or annoying to the public, local businesses and politicians, is considered the ‘criminalization of homelessness’ (O’Grady et al., 2011; 2013; Sylvestre, 2010a, b, 2011; Douglas, 2011).

Retooling the emergency response does not simply mean doing new things, it means stopping things that do not work and are clearly counter-productive. There is considerable evidence that the criminalization of homelessness has many negative consequences for the individuals involved—including burdensome fines that do not go away, traumatic encounters that undermine relations with police and potentially time in jail (O’Grady et al., 2011; 2013; Amster, 2004; National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, 2006, 2009). All of this can actually get in the way of helping people move forward with their lives. It is also worth pointing out that the criminalization of homelessness is a very expensive way to address the problem, in terms of the cost of policing, court time and the warehousing of homeless people in prison. It is simply bad policy and bad practice.

# Street Youth Legal Services

A program of Justice for Children and Youth

Toronto, Canada



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Justice for Children and Youth (JFCY) is a Legal Aid Ontario clinic that provides legal representation to Ontario youth aged 17 and under in the areas of child welfare, income maintenance, criminal, family, constitutional, human rights, education and health law. For the past 15 years, JFCY has supported Street Youth Legal Services (SYLS), an innovative program that provides legal advice, representation, referrals and education to street-involved youth, aged 16 to 24, via workshops and individual consultations.

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## Mission and Goals

- To provide street-involved youth and staff at agencies that serve them with information and knowledge in a way that overcomes legal barriers.
- To educate young people about the value of law and to empower them to assert their legal rights.
- To work with youth and youth-serving agencies to initiate community development activities linked to addressing systemic change.
- To engage in advocacy and research activities to address systemic change.

## Program Model

SYLS is a four-part program that incorporates individual advice and representation, education, community development and addresses systemic change. Using an outreach model, the project delivers legal information and services directly to young street-involved people in drop-in centres and shelters—the places where they congregate to access other services, such as health care, food, employment assistance and counselling. They also help connect young people with ongoing legal representation if they need it. Using a partnership model, SYLS provides training and free consultation to the many agencies it works with. SYLS additionally provides advocacy on behalf of the street-involved youth population, engaging in community development and law reform activities. They conduct extensive workshops on a range of topics, including, but not limited to: dealing with police, addressing criminal charges, youth records; victim compensation and public complaints, tenant rights and dealing with landlords, employment assistance, family and immigration issues.

Evaluation of the SYLS program attests to its effectiveness and also to the need for this kind of service and supports.

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## Conclusion

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There will always be a need for some form of emergency response, regardless of the effectiveness of prevention programs. However, such emergency services should never be the core of the response. The risk to young people of languishing in homelessness is quite significant, in terms of worsening mental and physical health, risk of criminal victimization, sexual exploitation and addictions. Moreover, there is the loss of opportunity—to go to school, to gain skills or to develop positive adult relationships—that gets undermined by lengthy stays in shelters. So while we need emergency services, they should be structured and supported to do what they do best—provide short-term and effective support, as a bridge to more sustainable longer term solutions. As has been argued throughout this report, this can only be achieved through the integration of emergency services within a broader strategy to end youth homelessness.

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One thing that unites all young people who experience homelessness is that they are attempting to obtain housing and live independently at a very young age with very little experience, minimal or no family support and limited resources.

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When young people leave the home of their parents or guardian and moving back is not an option, the ultimate goal should be to support them to move into more permanent accommodation in a safe and planned way. While the pathways to homelessness are varied and unique, one thing that unites all young people in this situation is that they are attempting to obtain housing and live independently at a very young age with very little experience, minimal or no family support and limited resources. For younger teens, those with complex mental health and addictions challenges, as well as young people facing discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender, or because of racism, this transition can become even more complex (Buccieri, 2013b). However, this can never be an excuse to hold young people back in anticipation of them becoming 'ready' for housing and supports. The use of emergency services should be a last—and temporary—resort.

In Canada, many communities have developed innovative models of accommodation and supports, but these mostly exist at the program or agency level. In the UK and Australia, accommodation and supports for young people are integrated into more strategic and cross-sectoral community plans. A key direction of the United Kingdom's National Youth Homelessness Scheme is that local authorities (with strong support from the national government) develop community-based systems plans to work with individual young people and their families not only to prevent homelessness, but to help those who no longer wish (or are unable) to remain at home, to move into independent accommodation in a planned, sustainable and safe way. Their accommodation strategy is an extension of their emergency response and involves intake and assessment, plus a range of housing options, including transitional and permanent housing. Key to the approach in the UK is that while housing is necessary and essential, young people will generally also need a range of supports to help them maintain their housing and to transition into adulthood.

In Australia, the response to youth homelessness is likewise strategic and coordinated (involving different levels of government and working across sectors) and the provision of

a range of options for accommodation (with supports) has been central to their response since the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) was first introduced in 1985. In the lead up to the development of the Road Home (Australia's strategy to end homelessness, 2008) the National Youth Commission Inquiry into Youth Homelessness (whose history goes back to 1987) did an extensive review of the Australian response to youth homelessness and issued a report that included commentary on the role of accommodation in a national strategy to address youth homelessness (National Youth Commission, 2008). In their recommendations, the commission reiterated the need to ensure a diverse range of housing options including supported accommodation (through SAAP) in every community. They identified the need for appropriate supports for young people once they have obtained housing, recognizing that even when young people have housing, problems can occur and they may slip back into homelessness.

Finally, the commission highlighted the importance of developing a new national affordable housing strategy for Australia (including new investments in social housing and tax incentives for the private sector to build new rental housing), with explicit attention to the needs of young people and in particular, disadvantaged young people.

A key point here and one that needs to be heeded by communities in Canada, is that housing interventions are not a magic solution; they have to be embedded within a broader strategy that takes account of the supply of affordable housing and the availability of necessary supports. That is, you cannot develop an effective strategy to end youth homelessness—one that includes an emphasis on housing options—unless you have an adequate supply of affordable housing. Research in Australia, the UK and the US repeatedly attest to the fact that effective strategies rely on a robust affordable housing supply. The best laid plans—including prevention, rapid rehousing and Housing First—cannot be fulfilled without affordable housing; an inadequate supply will inevitably lead to a bottle neck in the system and an expensive and ultimately damaging reliance on emergency services for individuals and families.

## Integrating Accommodation into a System of Care

There are key lessons to be learned from these international examples regarding the development of accommodation and supports for homeless youth that can be applied in the Canadian context. The needs of young people are diverse enough to require a range of housing options and these needs are in part determined by age and experience. Any effective approach to the provision of accommodation must be situated within a solid understanding of the needs of a developing adolescent and programs must offer more than shelter. As argued throughout this report, the goal of addressing youth homelessness must not be focused narrowly on achieving independence. Rather, it should be on supporting successful transitions to adulthood. Achieving adulthood means more than simply having a roof over one's head. It means having the income to support oneself (and the necessary education to sustain that) and the ability and maturity to make good decisions, to develop and sustain positive relationships and to have a meaningful life.

Addressing the diverse needs of young people through effective supports is key to facilitating this transition to adulthood. Using a coordinated assessment approach (as described in Section 4) needs are determined and the level, intensity and duration of case management is determined. In some cases, the supports are temporary, in other cases there will be a need for Intensive Case Management. For those with complex and ongoing needs, Assertive Community Treatment will be required. Because of their lack of experience in living independently, most youth will likely need life skills training and support in dealing with landlords, neighbours, finances, etc. In addition, many young people will have high needs in other areas. Challenges related to health, mental health, addictions, pregnancy, learning disabilities, anger management, etc., may require supports that are more intensive and longer term. Those defined as 'chronically disconnected', for instance, are more likely to fall into this category.

So when considering housing options for young people, one must consider the extent and kinds of supports a young person needs in addition to providing access to **stable housing**. Many of the elements of support discussed in the previous section on Crisis Supports—including case management, addressing legal and justice issues, a harm reduction approach, an anti-discrimination framework and a philosophy of “zero discharge into homelessness”—must also be part of the framework. A more comprehensive model of accommodation and supports should be built upon the four pillars of social and health supports, income/employment, education and youth engagement which are embedded within a broader system of care.

Any effective approach to the provision of accommodation must be situated within a solid understanding of the needs of a developing adolescent and programs must offer more than shelter.



**Diagram 8**  
Accommodation as part  
of a System of Care

## Social and Health Supports

There is a spectrum of social and health needs for which young people may require supports and depending on their age, level of development and degree of engagement (or disengagement) from family and institutions such as school, an effective model of accommodation must build in supports. Some young people may need supports for a long time or forever, others will need short-term transitional supports. In either case, what is important is that young people get the right supports: youth-driven and flexible. For ensuring housing stability and a transition to adulthood, the following social and health supports should be provided:

### Housing Supports

Given that many homeless youth will have little or no experience in finding and maintaining accommodation, housing supports are essential. This includes assistance in obtaining accommodation, negotiating with landlords, signing a lease and understanding tenant rights and responsibilities. It also means helping young people learn how to take care of and maintain housing, deal with friends and neighbours, etc. Given their impoverished status, many young people will require funds to cover rent, obtain furniture and purchase supplies, etc. The goal of housing supports should be supported by a “zero discharge into homelessness” philosophy, so that housing stability and crisis management become key.

### Life Skills

Young people should have access to programs, mentoring and individual support focusing on the enhancement of self-care and life skills. This includes many of the skills required to live independently, such as running a house, budgeting, setting up a bank account and developing financial literacy, etc. Health and wellness are also important, and should focus on self-care, hygiene, nutrition and cooking. There should also be support that enhances relationship skills (communication and anger management, for instance), and health and fitness. Action planning and goal setting are also important.

### Mental Health

Considerable research identifies the degree to which many homeless youth experience mental health challenges, the onset of which may or may not have preceded their experience of homelessness. As part of a ‘system of care’, young people should be supported in accessing assessments for mental health problems or learning disabilities, as well as in finding suitable interventions if required. Navigating the health care system—and mental health services in particular—can be challenging at the best of times and is particularly difficult for young people who experience homelessness.

### Transitional Supports

**Advocacy** Many young people need support in identifying resources and getting access to them. Navigating systems can be challenging for anyone at the best of times, and for young people who lack experience and may be subject to age discrimination, this can create additional barriers. Providing ongoing support, and in some cases accompaniment, is important for ensuring that young people are able to work their way through systems, and get access to services and supports that they need and are entitled to.

### Addictions

While substance use is not a problem for all or even most homeless youth, some young people will need ongoing support to deal with addictions, so as to not compromise their housing and to help them become more engaged with education, training and employment, as well as other meaningful activities. As suggested for emergency services, housing programs that adopt a ‘harm reduction’ philosophy and approach are best suited to young people. Again, it should be noted that a harm reduction approach does not exclude the possibility of abstinence-only environments, if that is what young people require to maintain their residency.

From a case management perspective, supports for young people should be driven both by the nature of the young person’s needs, but also their desires. A client-driven, flexible and open ended model is encouraged (Rosengard et al., 2007), where young people work with a counsellor or case manager to develop a plan and identify their goals, as well as the activities, resources and supports that will help them achieve those goals. In some cases, young people will benefit from group work and open sessions where they learn from instructors and each other.

The actual services and supports young people need do not necessarily have to be provided ‘in house’; in fact, one of the key features of an effective accommodation plan for young people is that the housing and supports provided are embedded in a ‘system of care’ approach, where there is a high degree of coordination between service providers and barriers to accessing mainstream services are reduced.

## Income and Employment

Inadequate income and employment are well documented as causes of and contributing factors to, young people cycling in and out of homelessness (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2013). Without a regular income from steady employment and the skills and opportunities made available by education, it can be very difficult to afford decent, stable accommodation and to pay for necessities such as food. In Canada, most young people experience great challenges in earning sufficient income to live independently, as they are often trapped in low-wage job sectors, where full time permanent employment is rare. When a young adult with inadequate education is able to enter the formal labour market, it usually means precarious employment, often on the margins of the economy. It is for this reason that so many young Canadians continue to live with their parents.

There is a need to enhance the employability of homeless youth through effective job training and employment programs. Many young people may not wish to (or may be unable to) return to school and instead will be looking for opportunities to increase their employability.

Traditional models of employment training that focus narrowly on skills development and motivation will be unlikely to adequately meet the needs of young people who have experienced homelessness. It is also important to consider that even when young people are employed, they may need additional income supports.

In Canada, there are several inspiring examples of such programs designed specifically for homeless youth, such as the highly successful Choices for Youth in St. John’s, Newfoundland, a ‘Green jobs’ employment and accommodations program and Bladerunners in Vancouver, which focuses on giving Aboriginal youth training opportunities in construction and cultural industries. There have also been effective strategies to engage the corporate sector in providing employment opportunities (Noble, 2012; Noble & Oseni, 2013). These experiences suggest that training and employment programs are most effective if:

- They are targeted to the needs and circumstances of young people who are homeless.
- Real and marketable skills development opportunities are available.
- Young people have housing while they are in training and after.
- Young people have income while they are in training so they can purchase food, required clothing, other job-related materials and transportation.
- Supports are provided for young people with addictions and/or mental health challenges.
- Job coaching and mentoring is provided.
- Young people have an opportunity for educational enhancement.
- The program is culturally sensitive.

While enhancing employability is important, it must also be recognized that many young people will not be able to obtain jobs with a living wage, particularly if they are young (under 18) and have dropped out of school. Thus, a key task of responding to youth homelessness and ensuring housing stability is to ensure that young people have an adequate income. This means designing social assistance programs that work for youth and in some cases providing young people with rent supplements. There should be targeted benefits/allowances programs for young people who obtain accommodations and there are examples of how this can work (see the section on Australia, page 53). Young people transitioning from care should have access to financial support to enable them to become independent. Importantly, if a goal of our response to youth homelessness is to create a longer term impact by enabling homeless youth to return to school and enhance their education, they will need ongoing funding and support to make this happen. Otherwise the need for employment to meet short-term needs will trump the longer term benefits of obtaining an education.

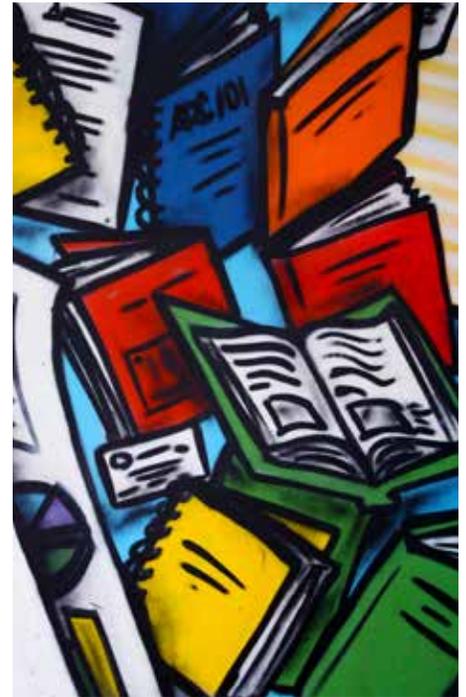
## Education

Most people in Canada recognize the importance of education for young people. As a society we generally do what we can to ensure young people stay in school as long as possible. Considerable evidence from Canada and elsewhere demonstrates that early school leavers face a competitive disadvantage in the marketplace (Sum et al., 2009; Statistics Canada, 2010; 2012b; 2012c). For instance, during the economic downturn in 2008/2009, the unemployment rate amongst dropouts was more than twice as high (23.2%) as it was for high school graduates (11.9%) (Statistics Canada, 2010). People have become increasingly aware that shifts in the economy require a more educated workforce and the rise of 'credentialism' (Côté & Bynner, 2008) has resulted in a steady decline in drop out rates in Canada, reaching a low of 7.8%% in 2011-2012 (Statistics Canada, 2012b). Those individuals with relatively low levels of education are finding the labour market less and less accommodating and it becomes harder to stay out of poverty. In fact, the Canadian Council on Learning reports that the lifetime costs of one person dropping out of high school is over \$300,000, which does not include other possible social costs including policing and corrections (Hankivsky, 2008).

We know from research that amongst street youth populations, levels of educational attainment are low, many have not completed high school and income support is often difficult to access. In two separate studies, Gaetz and O'Grady found the drop-out rate ranged from 57% to 65%, with an even higher rate amongst those who engage in prostitution, squeegeeing or panhandling (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Gaetz, O'Grady, Buccieri, 2010). Though homeless youth experience incredible barriers in obtaining education (Liljedahl et al. 2013), we do know some of the factors that promote school engagement, including an inclusive curriculum, anti-discriminatory practices and respectful encounters, community engagement, positive relations with adults and appropriate supports if young people require them.

Given the centrality of education in our understanding of what helps young people grow into healthy independent adults, it is somewhat surprising how little effort is given to getting homeless youth back in school. With some exceptions, few programs for homeless youth place educational support as a central focus of their work, in spite of what we know about the social and economic outcomes of early school leaving. Instead, the focus of emergency services and even many transitional housing programs is economic independence, which means finding a job.

As part of any systems-based plan for accommodation there should be an effort to address the educational challenges of young people (and not all homeless youth who dropped out of school will have had negative school experiences) and the provision of supports—including income—to enable them to enhance their educational opportunities. This should be a central goal of agencies, even when youth are accessing temporary emergency services. A focus on independence through employment training—without also addressing the educational deficits of homeless youth—may condemn these young people to a life of poverty, even if they are able to move out of homelessness.



**1 in 3**

youth experiencing homelessness graduate high-school

vs. **9 in 10** housed youth

## Youth Engagement

When one talks about supporting a young person's transition to adulthood, there is a concern not only for their achievement, but equally important, their well-being. One of the things that supportive parents and families do is help young people nurture positive relationships with others, connect to communities and become involved in activities that are meaningful and fulfilling. Ideally, young people are also supported to become involved in planning and decision-making that has an impact not only on themselves, but also potentially on the communities they live in. The Centres of Excellence for Children's Well-being define youth engagement as:

**“the meaningful participation and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity, with a focus outside of him or herself. The kind of activity in which the youth is engaged can be almost anything—sports, the arts, music, volunteer work, politics, social activism—and it can occur in almost any kind of setting.”**

(CECW, 2002:1)

Loiselle further suggests that: “full engagement consists of a behavioural component (e.g., spending time doing the activity), an affective component (e.g., deriving pleasure from participating in it) and a cognitive component (e.g., knowledge about the activity).” (Loiselle, 2002: n.p.)

Youth engagement—supporting the development of positive relationships and participation in meaningful activities—is a necessary factor in helping young people move forward with their lives. Earlier in this report we spoke about the importance of protective factors in helping young people deal with adversity. The concept of resilience is also used, which includes enhancing protective factors by providing environmental and relational supports. This means building on the strengths young people possess and giving them access to a nurturing environment, resources, relationships and activities that will help them cope with adversity, make better decisions regarding risk and seek positive outcomes. In thinking about accommodation and supports for homeless youth—or for those fleeing traumatic and difficult backgrounds—this is particularly important. In other words, providing young people with a roof over their heads, income and supports is not necessarily enough. The outcome of efforts to house youth should not result in a young person sitting alone in an apartment, bored, isolated and without meaningful relationships. This is particularly important to consider because for young people deeply involved in street life, finding accommodation can ironically mean yet more losses, as young people leave friends behind, often by choice, (Karabanow, 2004a) and may feel “especially isolated when living alone” (Millar, 2010:52).

When we talk about meaningful engagement, we refer to opportunities to develop both healthy relationships and participate in activities that are fulfilling. In both cases, there is an opportunity to nurture a sense of belonging, which is a critical component to helping young people feel accepted, competent, valued and part of something beyond one's self (Schonert-Reichl, 2008a,b).



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## → Youth Engagement

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Taking a ‘social determinants of health perspective’, youth engagement facilitates a range of positive outcomes including skills development, improvements in self esteem, health and stronger social relations with peers and adults. It also contributes to improved mental health and decreases in substance use, higher levels of school participation, lower rates of pregnancy in girls and a decrease in criminal behaviours (Ontario Public Health Association, 2009; 2011; Ungar et al., 2008; Oliver et al. 2006; Clea, 2002). While the benefits of involvement in sports, for instance, are well understood, research also identifies the benefits of the arts for engaging youth, including improvements in cognitive function (Gazzaniga, 2008; Posner et al., 2008).

Because not all young people have the same strengths, confidence and skills to actively engage in sports, recreation, volunteerism, community service or in developing relationships, the provision of mentoring and support programs, which can be developed in partnership with other mainstream providers, becomes essential in order to nurture youth engagement. However, this does not mean that youth engagement strategies must always be adult led. Forms of engagement that actively involve young people in decision-making and planning are key and are also central to developing inclusive participation in civil society (Pereira, 2007; Delgado & Staples, 2008).

A final point: strategies of engagement are best supported by building on the natural supports a young person possesses—peers, family members, other adults etc. This means that unless it is unsafe to do so, young people should, where possible, be provided with housing options in or near their communities of origin, as this will enhance the possibilities for engagement, particularly if young people are already in some way connected to community-based supports and services.

In summary—successful strategies to provide accommodation for young people must be built on a solid foundation that seeks to help young people not just transition to independence, but to adulthood. This means more than bricks and mortar. It means access to education and employment, necessary supports based on need and meaningful engagement with other people and with fulfilling activities.

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# Train for Trades

## A program of Choices for Youth

St. John's, Newfoundland



Choices for Youth's Train for Trades is an innovative program designed to create employment opportunities within the construction industry for at-risk and homeless youth. It is an excellent example of a housing and employment program model that incorporates the four pillars of support. The program has demonstrated success in improving the lives of young people who participate by enhancing their employability through skills development and education, thus helping them obtain and maintain housing and moving them towards adult independence and stability.

What makes the program particularly unique is the focus of the training. Adapting the model pioneered by Warm Up Winnipeg (a training program for Aboriginal youth and adults in Winnipeg), they shifted from training for general construction to focusing on 'green jobs'—retrofitting low income and social housing for greater energy efficiency. Energy poverty—that is, the reality that rising fuel and heating costs have a huge impact on low income individuals with limited spending power—is a concern in virtually every community in Canada and is often dealt with through supplements to help people pay their gas and electric bills. Energy retrofitting is a positive approach to youth employment training as it addresses real community needs, environmental issues and youth homelessness all at the same time. For this reason, Train for Trades is both a program model ripe for adaptation in virtually every community in Canada, but also one that could potentially be scaled up significantly in larger cities.

## Program Model

### Employment Training

Young people are provided with a combination of instruction by a local college (four weeks training) and then obtain real world, jobsite work experience under the mentorship of tradespeople.

### Education

Young people in the program are also encouraged to think about school—to complete their high school and consider post-secondary education. According to staff, a high percentage of participants go on to complete high school.

### Housing

Young people are provided with housing while in the program and part of their life skills support is intended to help them learn to live independently.

### Supports

The program provides intensive case management and supports, based on the needs of young people. They learn life skills, are provided job coaching and supported through the ups and downs of life at work, obtaining pay-cheques, resolving conflict etc. They use an 'intensive support' model by ensuring that young people have access to counselling and support 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

### Engagement

Young people are supported in developing positive relations with other young people and adults. In an effort to help them learn the value of giving back to the community, they are involved in additional projects designed to benefit the community, such as renovating community centres etc.

**Choices for Youth/Train for Trades website:**  
<http://www.choicesforyouth.ca/programs/train-for-trades/>

Canadian Observatory on Homelessness. (2013). 18. Case Study: Choices for Youth Train for Trades In S. Gaetz, B. O'Grady, K. Buccieri, J. Karabanow & A. Marsolais (Eds.), *Youth homelessness in Canada: Implications for policy and practice*, 311-322 Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

## Accommodation Options for Youth

When considering models of accommodation for young people, it should be stated up front that there is no single, ideal housing option that will meet the needs of all youth. An effective response to youth homelessness should give young people choices and options based on their age, experience, level of independence and need. Novac et al. (2004a,b) reviewed different approaches to housing for people who are homeless and remarked on the diversity of options:

“Program models range from medical treatment to community economic development. They tend to cluster at the ends of a continuum from service-intensive facilities with rigorous expectations of residents (“high-demand” programs) to programs with flexible requirements and optional services (“low-demand”). Transitional housing is distinguished from supportive housing primarily in its length of residency—supportive housing is permanent”  
(Novac et al., 2004b:6)

Based on a range of factors and depending on the individual, clearly some housing options will be more appropriate than others. Some young people may require high levels of support and are more suitably housed in institutional congregate facilities, with common areas and adult support present 24 hours a day. Youth who are chronically disconnected, with few family supports and a history of institutional involvement (child protection or corrections) may have high support needs, but an institutional congregate setting may not be ideal at all. Older youth who are ‘temporarily disconnected,’ but who have independent living skills and low support needs, may simply require assistance in obtaining their own housing, with very little additional supports. A large number of young people will fit somewhere in between these situations.

Ideally, then, there should then be a range of housing options for young people, extending from transitional housing to fully independent living. For many young people transitional housing is an important option because they may not yet be ready to live independently. That is, they lack the skills, confidence, maturity and experience to move immediately into independent living. Transitional housing is typically time limited, but is accompanied by a range of supports to help young people get ready for independent living.

At the other end of the spectrum and certainly the goal of all models of accommodation and supports for young people, is independent living, which refers to situations where young people obtain and maintain their own or shared permanent housing in either the social housing sector or private market and their use of supports and services is minimal. Many young people will need some form of enhanced accommodation where they obtain (or are about to) their own accommodation in a non-institutional environment, but may require some level of ongoing support, whether it is financial, social or health related. Some will need supports in order to get into housing in the first place, but their needs will lessen once they are housed and as they grow older. Other young people may need ongoing supports.

The kinds of housing and supports that young people will need will be determined in large part by age, but importantly, must also take account other issues, including mental health challenges, disengagement from family and school, disability and addictions. Finally, models of accommodation and support should incorporate options for different family types. The assumption is often made that homeless youth are unattached individuals. Many have partners and indeed, a high percentage are young parents, though they may no longer live with their children. The opportunity to obtain multiple room units would facilitate family reunification, for young people who have had to give up their children because of their homelessness.

In the end, the determination of the best housing option for a young person should ideally be centered on the young person and their needs. Young people should not be forced into a type of accommodation if they are not ready for it and if it does not provide the kinds of supports they need.

## Transitional Housing for Youth

Transitional housing refers to a supportive–yet temporary–type of accommodation that is meant to bridge the gap from homelessness to permanent housing by offering structure, supervision, support (for addictions and mental health, for instance), life skills and in some cases, education and training.

“Transitional housing is conceptualized as an intermediate step between emergency crisis shelter and permanent housing. It is more long-term, service-intensive and private than emergency shelters, yet remains time-limited to stays of three months to three years. It is meant to provide a safe, supportive environment where residents can overcome trauma, begin to address the issues that led to homelessness or kept them homeless and begin to rebuild their support network.” (Novac et al., 2004:2)

Historically, transitional housing programs were situated within dedicated, building-specific environments, where there was more common space and less private space than might be the case in permanent housing environments (Sprague, 1991; Novac et al., 2009). However, as the concept of transitional housing has evolved, new approaches that incorporate scattered-site housing are now being adopted. In such cases, some of the transitional ‘supports’ are considered portable.

Transitional housing, as an approach, has long been seen as part of the housing continuum for people who are homeless and in particular for sub-populations such as youth. However, in recent years it has become somewhat controversial, particularly in light of the success of Housing First models, which do not require ‘readiness’ for a transition. Eberle et al., (2007) identify two key concerns:

1. Transitional programs reward those who do well by requiring them to move on.
2. “They can only be effective if affordable independent housing is available to move to afterwards”

(Eberle et al., 2007:37)

An additional concern has to do with the time-limited nature of transitional housing. Most programs in Canada determine a maximum length of stay, which is often quite short (usually one year, but there are some examples in Canada where young people can stay eighteen months or more). This is antithetical to a positive approach that supports young people transitioning to adulthood. Given the needs of the developing adolescent and young adult, the inability of homeless youth to earn necessary income to support themselves (especially drop-outs) and the broader economic climate that makes it challenging for any young adult to achieve economic independence at a young age (as discussed in Section 2), a model that foreshortens a young person’s stay without providing necessary post-residency supports, cannot guarantee that young people in these situations will not fall back in to homelessness.

Nevertheless, an argument can be made that when dealing with homeless youth there is still a role for transitional housing, particularly for those at the younger end of the youth spectrum, provided some key transformations to the model are incorporated. Homeless youth generally leave home without any experience or skills for independent living and may need ongoing or longer term supports that may be several years in duration (see the discussion of the Foyer model, below).

When dealing with homeless youth there is still a role for transitional housing, particularly for those at the younger end of the youth spectrum, provided some key transformations to the model are incorporated. Homeless youth generally leave home without any experience or skills for independent living and may need ongoing or longer term supports that may be several years in duration.

## → Transitional Housing for Youth

Though there have been some broader Canadian studies on the role of transitional housing as part of a range of housing options for youth (Eberle et al. 2007; Millar, 2009; 2010), there is surprisingly little evaluative research on the effectiveness of transitional housing programs for youth in Canada. Exceptions are a study of Eva's Phoenix, a Toronto-based program that has demonstrated positive outcomes (Zyzis et al., 2003) and Peel Youth Village (Bridgeman, 2009; Transitions for Youth, 2007). However, there is very little published research on the long-term effectiveness of such programs for youth in Canada, or of their success in helping young people transition to stable housing afterward (Serge, 2002; Eberle, 2007; Novac et al., 2009).

The situation is the same in the United States. In their policy briefing on youth homelessness for the 2010 Opening Doors Homelessness Strategy (USICH, 2010b), the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness lamented that while there were an estimated 130 transitional housing programs in the US serving 4,000 young people annually, there was very little data in existence regarding the effectiveness of these programs (USICH, 2010c). There are now a number of research projects on transitional housing underway in the United States, however.

One model of transitional housing for youth for which there is an extensive body of evaluative research is the Foyer model (Gaetz & Scott, 2012). There are a broad range of examples in the United Kingdom and Australia (see box) (Quilgars et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2006; Lovatt & Whitehead, 2006; Quilgars & Anderson, 1995; Common Ground Community and Good Sheppard Services, 2009; DHS, 2010; Bond, 2010; Beer et al., 2005).

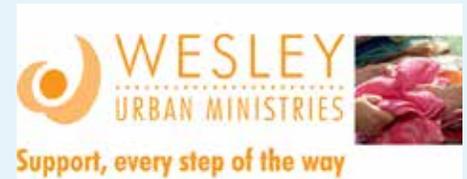
The research on transitional housing models for youth—including the Foyer—has identified some important characteristics of effective transitional housing models.

*These include:*

- Centering the project on the needs of adolescents and young adults.
- Young people must demonstrate a desire for change.
- Adopting a client-centered case-management approach and ensuring that young people have access to a range of services (which can be delivered internal or external to the organization).
- Allowing young people up to the age of 25 to stay as long as they need to.
- Young people should not be discharged into homelessness—or prematurely into independent living—because of defined tenancy limits.
- Clear plans should be developed and implemented that support transitions to independent living and adulthood.
- Focusing on personal development, life skills and enhancing self-esteem through supportive client/staff relationships.
- Facilitating opportunities for youth engagement—with their community and with recreational activities.
- Providing smaller facilities, or scattered site approaches that move away from more 'institutional' settings.
- Enabling financial support where necessary, so young people do not have to pay more than 30% of their income on rent.
- Education and training opportunities should be a central focus.
- Aftercare supports should be in place for when young people leave transitional housing.

# Wesley Youth Housing Program

Hamilton, Ontario



Wesley Youth Housing Program (WYH) is a transitional housing program located in Hamilton, Ontario. Run by Wesley Urban Ministries, the program operates within the integrated systems model of youth homelessness services in Hamilton and was developed in through the Street Youth Planning Collaborative, in partnership with City Housing Hamilton and the City of Hamilton. WYH provides a fully furnished multi-staged housing program for homeless youth and those at risk of homelessness between the ages of 16-21. Developed in 2007, the has a capacity of nine youth in stage one and ten youth in stage two.

## Intake

To access the program, youth are referred primarily by professional/agency referrals; however, self-referrals are accepted. There is an intake package that includes a section the youth completes and another that the referring professional completes.



Common living room in Stage 1 unit.



Bachelor unit in Stage 2.

## Two Stage Program Model

The WYH Transitional Housing Program operates as a two stage model. In Stage One young people live in a pod environment with up to two other youth. Each youth has their own locked bedroom, but they share common areas including kitchen, eating area, living room and two bathrooms. During this phase young people receive a range of supports. They work closely with mentors who help them set and work towards goals, including attending school, gaining employment and addressing issues related to health and well-being. They receive one-on-one life skills support from a Life Coach, who helps them learn about budgeting, grocery shopping, time management etc. In addition to mentors being available 24/7, youth have access to on site community partners who are part of the Street Youth Planning Collaborative.

In Stage 2 of the program young people move into an individual bachelor apartments. Youth in this stage continue to have access to support from mentors, but are provided with an increased opportunity to practice their newly developed skills and independence. When young people feel ready to leave, they are assisted in obtaining housing in the community.

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## → Transitional Housing for Youth

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The form and program model of transitional housing should be designed to meet the differing needs of young people; this also includes the type of housing and facility. In many transitional housing programs, young people live in a dedicated shared facility, with around-the-clock support. Ideally, young people should have access to either individual or shared rooms (depending on age or need) and there should also be common recreational and social spaces. The congregate living environment is important for some youth, who will benefit from the companionship and a higher level of day-to-day support. This kind of institutionally-based arrangement is most likely preferable for younger teens. For instance, a 14, or even a 16 year old, may require the supports of a transitional housing program for several years (and certainly more than one), plus potentially aftercare support. This first stage is just part of the accommodation pathway for a young person who becomes homeless.

There are also transitional housing models that are not institutionally-based that offer a more decentered or dispersed scattered site approach to accommodation. For young people who are adverse to institutional-like environments, such transitional housing means that young people live independently or in small groups and that the necessary supports are portable. The advantage of such an innovation is that it supports people in their transition from homelessness, gives them greater control over their tenure and is an alternative to an institutional living environment (Novac et al., 2009; Nesselbuch, 1998). Particularly for young people leaving care (group homes) or juvenile detention this may be more suitable. At the same time, what distinguishes transitional housing from enhanced accommodation (below) is that young people do not control the lease, although there are models that enable lease conversion (that is, over a period of time, a young person may take over the lease). Finally, it is important to consider the location of housing, for as Karabanow & Naylor identified, many young people struggling to leave the streets prefer housing that is removed from the areas where street youth congregate, lowering the risk of a return to street involvement (Karabanow & Naylor, 2013).

One of the challenges of all transitional housing models is negotiating a smooth move from interim housing to independent living. One innovation to facilitate this transition involves the use of convertible leases. Young individuals with little independent living experience may prefer a housing option where they are not responsible for the lease at the beginning. However in time, and as they develop greater independence, there is an opportunity for the lease to be transferred to the youth so that they don't have to move and depending on their need, some levels of supports continue. The advantage of this approach to transitional housing is that there is no set length of stay and young people are able to assert more control and independence as they age. This approach to transitional housing has been implemented in a few Canadian settings (Eberle, 2007; Millar, 2009). In Australia, the Youth Head Lease Transfer Scheme (now part of the "Same House, Different Landlord" scheme) has been in place for several decades (Leebeck, 2009). This "convertible lease" program has evolved over time and evaluations have shown its effectiveness in supporting formerly homeless youth to move to independent living (Queensland Department of Housing, Local Government and Planning, 1994). In addition, when young people leave such housing to move into independent living, they are often able to take their furniture with them.

## → Transitional Housing for Youth

As we move forward in creating more effective responses to youth homelessness, transitional housing should be configured in such a way as to provide a young person with longer-term supports in order to build life skills and enhance individual capacity to become economically self-sufficient and socially integrated into the community. Unlike previous models that limit residency, these supports should be highly flexible and not time limited, based on the age at which a young person enters a program and their need. A recent Canadian Observatory on Homelessness report, “Live, Learn and Grow” (Gaetz & Scott, 2012), articulates a model for the broader adaptation of the Foyer in the Canadian context (see below).

## The Foyer

The Foyer is a particularly appealing example of innovation in transitional housing and offers an integrated living model where young people are housed for a longer period of time than is typically the case, are offered living skills and are either enrolled in education or training, or are employed. It is a transitional housing model for youth that has attained great popularity in the UK, Australia and elsewhere. It can offer inspiration for how we might address the housing needs of homeless youth and in particular younger teens and those leaving care (child protection) or juvenile detention. The Foyer model is currently being piloted in at least two Canadian cities (Calgary and Edmonton), in ways that adapt the model to our context and integrate important innovations.

The Foyer is a model of accommodation for which there is a body of research that attests to its effectiveness. According to the **Live, Learn and Grow** report, key philosophical principles of a Canadian Foyer should include:

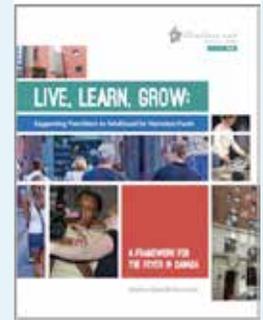
- A focus on helping disadvantaged young people who are homeless or in housing need—including young people leaving care—to achieve the transition to adulthood and from dependence to independence.
- A developmentally-appropriate environment to build competence and a feeling of achievement.
- A holistic approach to meeting the young person’s needs based on an understanding of adolescent development.
- A formal plan and agreement between the Foyer and young person as to how the Foyer’s facilities and local community resources will be used in making the transition to adulthood.
- A supported transition that is not time limited, in which

- young people can practice independent living. An investment in education, training, life skills and meaningful engagement in order to improve long-term life chances.
- The provision of a community of peers and caring adults with emphasis on peer mentoring.
- The provision of necessary and appropriate aftercare to ensure successful transitions to adulthood and independent living. (Gaetz & Smith, 2012:27).

So, in exchange for services tailored to their needs, young people entering a Foyer are expected to actively engage in their own development and make a positive contribution to their local community. The nature of this exchange depends very much on the individual, where they have come from, the barriers they are facing and their aspirations for the future.

Some key features of the Foyer that make it stand apart from more traditional models of transitional housing include: a) the intensive focus on enhancing educational opportunities, recognizing the importance of education to young people’s life chances and b) the length of stay is extended beyond one year. This latter point is important and represents a radical shift from what is more typical practice in Canada. It recognizes that time-limited stays in transitional housing make no sense in terms of adolescent development. While the length of stay in Foyers in the UK is typically two years, the **Live, Learn and Grow** report recommends that young people be permitted to stay as long as they need to, up to the age of 24.

# Live, Learn, Grow: Supporting Transitions to Adulthood for Homeless Youth



This report reflects on the possibilities of adapting and in fact improving on, the Foyer model for the Canadian context. The first section of the report provides an overview of the challenges homeless youth face in securing and maintaining housing, to be followed by an analysis of the role that transitional housing can play in supporting young people as they move forward with their lives. In the second section, the underlying philosophy of the Foyer is explored, key components are explained and the research on program effectiveness is examined. The final section of the report provides a framework for the Foyer that identifies how this model can be adapted and implemented in the Canadian context. The proposed framework does not simply replicate what has been developed elsewhere, but rather seeks to incorporate recent developments in housing responses for young people who have experienced homelessness and embed it in the Canadian context.

## To find out more:

Case Study: Boys and Girls Club of Calgary–The Infinity Project

- [Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2013](#)

## Foyer Toolkit

The toolkit we have developed is designed to assist communities in adapting this model to their local context. It is intended to give service providers and policy makers an essential understanding of the key components necessary for developing a successful Foyer. This material will be particularly useful if you are starting a Foyer and need to brief funders, staff etc., on the basics of Foyers for youth.

### The Foyer Toolkit contains the following sections:

- What is a Foyer?
- The Foyer and Transitions to Adulthood
- The Philosophy and Principles of the Foyer
- Foyer Essentials Part 1: The Program
- Foyer Essentials Part 2: Accommodation
- Foyer Essentials Part 3: Organizational Framework
- Foyer Case Studies
- Resources from the Foyer Federation

### To find out more, go to the Homeless Hub:

<http://www.homelesshub.ca/foyer>

## Independent Living

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Whether leaving home for the first time, exiting the shelter system or graduating from transitional housing, the pathway a young person takes on the road to adulthood should eventually lead to some kind of independent living. The key focus of support is to help young people access suitable and appropriate housing in the first place and to provide a range of supports including financial support (if a down payment and/or furnishings are required) that help young people sustain their housing and avoid another episode of homelessness.

There are some interesting lessons from programs that support young people to live independently. A common underlying theme is that no program can work effectively if there is not an inadequate supply of affordable housing. The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) defines a household as being in “core housing need” if its housing: “falls below at least one of the adequacy, affordability or suitability standards and would have to spend 30% or more of its total before-tax income to pay the median rent of alternative local housing that is acceptable (meets all three housing standards).” (CMHC, 2012) In a tight housing market, young people may face age discrimination and/or lack the earning potential to support their housing needs. As a larger percentage of income goes to pay for housing, there is less left for fundamental needs such as food. This suggests that responses to youth homelessness that focus on independent living must both work to increase the supply of affordable housing in the community, but must also focus on ensuring that young people have the necessary income supports to obtain and maintain housing.

There are different approaches to supporting young people to move into independent living. In the UK, they speak about ‘Move on’ options when referring to the need to move young people out of emergency shelters and into independent living as quickly as possible. They recognize that young people, particularly those under the age of 18, face substantial barriers to obtaining accommodation, including age discrimination, legal barriers, problems accessing benefits, insufficient income and of course a shortage of affordable or acceptable housing.

## → Independent Living

It is believed to be crucial to begin planning an accommodation pathway at the earliest stage of engagement with young people who are homeless, or at risk of being homeless. This may include supportive housing options or independent living. On the National Youth Homelessness Scheme website (UK), they define the hallmarks of effective move-on options as including:

- "A range of options, which reflect the differing needs and aspirations of young people
- Availability of floating support for young people after leaving supported accommodation
- Social and private housing stock which meets minimum standards—benchmarks such as the Decent Homes Standard are supported by the local authority and partners in all sectors
- Issues about the location and safety of the accommodation are considered
- Affordability issues are considered and help offered to maximize income, overcome the barriers to affordable housing for young people and facilitate savings for future housing needs
- A range of stakeholders are involved with planning, developing and managing this part of the accommodation pathway for young people
- A strategic approach is used, through local homelessness strategies, Supporting People plans and the working groups which oversee implementation of these
- Support staff are well-informed about the wide range of options available to young people and information, practical advice and support is provided through a pathway planning approach to support young people in developing their individual abilities and interests"

(National Youth Homelessness Scheme, as quoted in Youth Homelessness North East.

<http://youthhomelessnortheast.org.uk/move-on-event-3rd-april-2012/>)

Models of enhanced accommodation provide young people with a greater opportunity for more independent living, but enable them to obtain the flexible, individualized supports they need. Sometimes referred to as floating supports or tenancy sustainment, such supports are designed to enable young people with medium and low needs to live independently, by providing them with practical and personal support that is very much linked to their individual needs. For those with higher needs, tenant (floating) support workers can also act in a case management capacity and can help young people access the services they need, as they move to greater and greater levels of independence. In the UK, a key part of the accommodation and support strategy for youth involves floating supports. An extensive evaluation identified that there is considerable evidence of the cost effectiveness of floating supports in terms of:

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- Reducing rent arrears
- Prevention of tenancy breakdown and the resulting costs
- The reduction of hospital admissions (for people with mental health problems)
- The timely discharge of older people from hospital
- The reduction of re-offending rates
- Addressing anti-social behaviour
- Preventing truancy costs

(Communities and Local Government, 2008: 6)

## → Independent Living

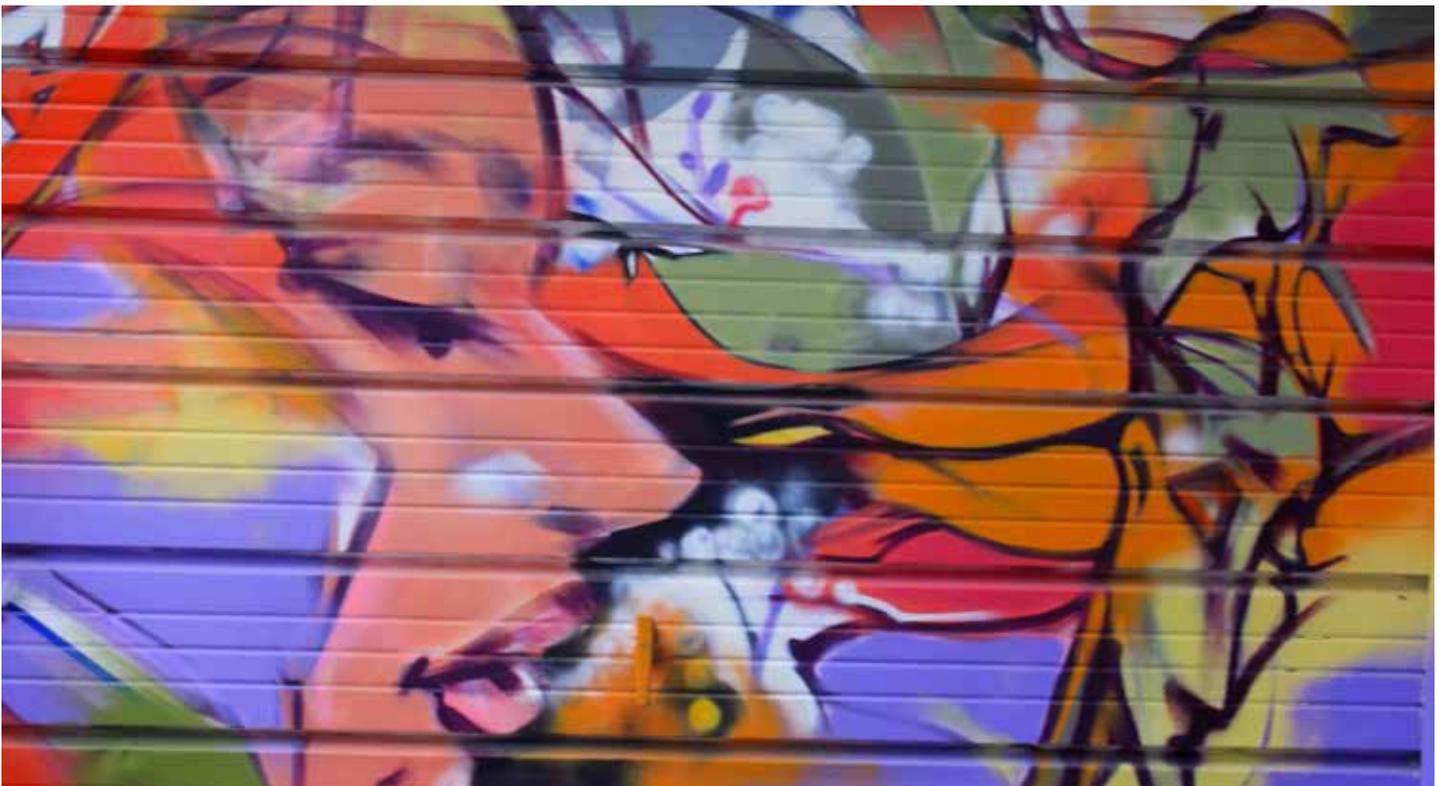
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As the young person grows older, matures and develops skills for independent living, the level of supports may decrease or end altogether. However, for a smaller sub-population (young people with a serious mental illness, disability or addictions challenge), the supports may be continuous, long-term or even permanent. Finally, for some youth there may be a direct transition from shelters or living with parents to independent living with minimal or no external supports. This is probably more the case for older youth who have lived independently in the past, have sufficient life skills, education and employment experience to allow them to sustain themselves.

A key goal of dispersed models of enhanced accommodation (as well as transitional housing) is the focus on community integration. That is, rather than have a separate facility, helping young people obtain accommodation in neighbourhoods of their own choosing may reduce stigma, encourage development of relationships within the community and enhance youth engagement. This is in line with the conceptualization of supported housing that articulates the underlying values as being empowerment and community integration (Parkinson et al., 1999; Nelson et al., 2001; Parkinson and Nelson, 2003; Kirsch et al., 2009).

“It is a strength-focused approach that provides considerable choice to residents over housing, living companions and daily activities. Receiving treatment is not a requirement and the role of the landlord and the support provider are separated or “de-linked”. However, supports and rehabilitative services are often accessed as desired by individuals to help them stay in their home and participate in their communities.” (Kirsch et al. 2009:13)

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## Housing First—Does it Work for Young People?

In Canada, Housing First is quickly being accepted as an effective response to homelessness, and there is a substantial body of research on its effectiveness both as a philosophy underlying planned responses to homelessness and as a program or intervention. The **At Home/Chez Soi** project funded by the Mental Health Commission of Canada is the most extensive research project ever conducted on Housing First. It has answered a lot of important questions about the efficacy of the model. In addition, the recent book **Housing First in Canada: Supporting Communities to End Homelessness** (Gaetz, et al., 2013) provides a framework for communities to understand the concept, plus a number of case studies that chart the development and implementation of the model in different communities. However, until recently there has been very little research on its applications to sub-populations (outside of people with mental illness/ addictions), including youth.

Nevertheless, as Housing First grows in popularity, several places in Canada—including Toronto, Halifax, Vancouver, Calgary and Edmonton—are experimenting with its applicability to young people. For instance, in Vancouver, Directions Youth Services Centre has adopted a Housing First approach for homeless youth aged 19-24. Young people in the program receive support over a two-year period to find, acquire and maintain housing. The program focuses on developing individualized housing and life-skills plans for each youth participant. Youth workers work closely with the youth to evaluate their success and ensure their housing issues and conflicts are addressed. In Calgary, both the Boys and Girls Club (see next page) and Woods Homes have implemented Housing First programs for youth, with promising results after the first year (minimum 85 per cent housing retention rate).

So a question that can be asked is whether or not the success of Housing first renders other models of accommodation and support irrelevant? Because the dearth of research on the relevance of this model for youth makes answering that question difficult, we are learning things that suggest that while the underlying philosophy of Housing First should be embraced (that homeless youth should be provided with housing without preconditions), as a program it may not be appropriate or effective for all youth or in all contexts. Emerging research on a youth-focused program in London, Ontario suggests that while many young people thrive in a Housing First context, it does not work for everyone. Those with mental health and addictions issues (or a combination of both) in some cases find that the choice and independence offered by the model were too much to handle and could be experienced as a 'set up for failure' (Forchuk et al., 2013). That is, some young people felt that independent living was isolating and may become an enabling environment

for drug use and therefore would prefer to address other developmental/health issues prior to independent living. Forchuk and her team conclude that a 'one size fits all' approach proposed by some advocates is actually quite limiting and ignores the incredible variability in needs and circumstances of young people who are homeless.

"The social, cultural, financial and existential (i.e., the perceived meaning of one's existence and place in the world, as well as how this meaning may influence the decisions one makes) situations of the study's participants are very different."

(Forchuk et al., 2013:113)

To consider Housing First in the context of adolescence and young adulthood, one must also recognize other concerns. In a tight housing market with little affordable housing, young people face age discrimination that may mean accessing housing is more difficult. Additionally, when considering the goal of working with homeless youth is successful transition to adulthood, one must consider the age and developmental appropriateness of putting youth into Housing First programs. The independence that is simultaneously required by and fostered through, Housing First may undermine other developmental goals and challenges, such as obtaining an education. Having to focus on earning enough money to live independently and to run a house, may unwittingly shift the priorities of young people in the program, away from education which will have long lasting benefits, towards the short-term need of paying the rent.

So, Housing First is clearly a viable, effective and preferred option for some youth, but not all. As we move forward, the task of reconciling the emphasis on Housing First with the need to consider transitional housing models such as the Foyer must be addressed. It is possible to consider, in the case of youth, that transitional housing can be part of a Housing First approach, providing that there is a pathway from transitional housing into permanent housing. As part of a spectrum of options for accommodation and support, it is worth being reminded that 'Housing First' should also mean 'Preference First' (Forchuk, 2012).

In the coming year, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness will be releasing a **Framework for Housing First for Youth**, which will draw from existing research plus extensive consultations with members of the Street Youth Planning Collaborative (Hamilton) and the National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness. Here, a framework identifies the appropriate models of housing and support that are required to plan and implement a Housing First strategy embedded in a youth development perspective.

The Infinity Project, run by the Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary, is an innovative Housing First project for young people 16-24 years of age. The goal of the program is to help youth become permanently housed and to increase and maintain self-sufficiency. Young people are assessed and then supported to obtain housing throughout the City. Though many young people were able to contribute to rent through income earned or through benefit programs, these funds were generally not adequate to cover monthly living expenses and most youth still required substantial rental subsidies.

The Infinity Project does more than merely facilitate access to housing. They work to prepare young people for self sufficiency (obtaining and maintaining a stable source of income) and for productive adult living. The latter is achieved through facilitating reconnection with family and natural supports where safe and appropriate, exploring community resources and opportunities with youth in their community, supporting youth to attend community events, identifying interests with the youth and exploring opportunities for them to become involved in programming, facilitating referrals or volunteering, exploring with youth their educational and career goals, helping youth locate education or training programs to meet their goals, providing referral and advocacy as needed and assisting youth in system navigation.

With a small core staff, the Infinity Project is embedded within a partnership model that helps meet the individual needs of young people in the program. The program incorporates many of the four pillars identified on page 86, including facilitating reconnection with family and natural supports, community engagement and supporting young people in working towards educational and career goals.

The Infinity program adopts a case management approach to support young people and utilizes the Outcomes Star to help young people navigate stages of change (and also for the purposes of program evaluation). At the end of the first year of the pilot program, Infinity has begun to show impressive results. Ninety-six per cent of participants remained housed, in part because of the Boys and Girls Clubs' philosophy of "zero discharge into homelessness." This means that if housing breaks down due to a crisis, behavioural challenges or other issues, young people will not find themselves on the streets, but rather alternative accommodations will be secured. All young people in the program were involved in community activities and over 85% of the youth were able to access more targeted community activities and supports. The ability to provide necessary supports to youth with higher needs is also a key marker of the success of this program. Fifty per cent of the youth in the program (in 2011) were able to access mental health and addictions support and some made the choice to attend a residential treatment program.

**To find out more:**

Case Study: Boys and Girls Club of Calgary–The Infinity Project

- [Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2013](#)

## Conclusion



Appropriate options for accommodation and supports are a final and key component for an effective strategy to end youth homelessness. Yet in thinking about accommodation, once again it is crucial that we don't simply adapt in problematic ways models designed for adults. The housing and accommodation needs of adolescents and young adults are complex and distinct and tied to a whole range of important developmental tasks that require age-appropriate supports. The goal, once again, is not merely to become independent but to successfully nurture a transition to adulthood and well-being.

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It is worth asking, is this the best we can do? Are young people who become homeless destined to spend years in the shelter system mired in the street youth lifestyle, languishing in poverty and vulnerable of exploitation? Are there other ways of thinking about these options? The good news is that there are real, practical solutions to youth homelessness and these can be applied in communities across the country.

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For the past several decades, Canada has been struggling with the problem of homelessness and in particular, youth homelessness. Many—but not all—communities have responded by developing community-based emergency services, many of which are undoubtedly excellent and do play an important role in alleviating some of the worst outcomes of homelessness. In most cases they clearly understand the need to do something about youth homelessness, but only rarely are these services coordinated in an integrated and strategic way. At times it does not seem that we are making a huge impact on homelessness, or reducing it as a problem (Segaert, 2012).

It is worth asking, is this the best we can do? Are young people who become homeless destined to spend years in the shelter system mired in the street youth lifestyle, languishing in poverty and vulnerable of exploitation? Are there other ways of thinking about these options?

The good news is that there are real, practical solutions to youth homelessness and these can be applied in communities across the country. The best solutions to youth homelessness must necessarily be based on evidence, by understanding the problem through research and by identifying innovative and promising practices that can be applied in different contexts. In writing this report, then, the intent was twofold. The first purpose was to review

and present what we know from research about youth homelessness. This growing body of research both enhances our understanding of youth homelessness, its causes and conditions (Gaetz et al., 2013) and also points to effective interventions and responses.

The second purpose of this report is to present a practical framework for ending youth homelessness. The ideas that inform this framework are based on a review of what we know about addressing youth homelessness, drawing on academic research, program evaluations and a broad range of policies, strategies and plans from Canada, the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom. This review points to something interesting that is happening around the world. There is an emerging convergence of approaches, based on both years of trial and error and evaluation. This convergence centers around the knowledge that successful strategies to address youth homelessness must be built upon the need to reorient national, regional and local responses to homelessness away from managing or responding to homelessness, to one that focuses on ending homelessness. That is, we need to shift our focus from providing only emergency services, such as shelters and day programs (which may unnecessarily prolong the experience of homelessness), to one that emphasizes prevention on the one hand and moving people out of homelessness as quickly as possible on the other.

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## → Conclusion

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So, how do we get there? A strategic response to youth homelessness is built upon five basic themes:

**First, that it is possible to prevent and end youth homelessness through developing and implementing a plan, with clear objectives and targets.** Effective strategic responses attempt to reduce a problem, rather than just manage it. Australia and the UK have strong national plans and investments which support communities in responding to youth homelessness. The “Ten Year Plans to End Homelessness” model, pioneered in the United States and championed by the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, has been shown to be successful and is now being taken up by a number of communities in Canada. Every community should have a similar strategic response and plan to end youth homelessness.

**Second, youth homelessness can only be effectively tackled through an integrated “system of care”.** Evidence suggests that the most successful responses to youth homelessness are strategic and coordinated, placing a much greater emphasis on prevention and moving people out of homelessness as quickly as possible. This is best achieved through the coordination and integration of programs, services and service delivery systems (both within and external to the homelessness sector) at every level—from policy, to service provision, to case management and client flow—based on client need. We can no longer rely on an ad-hoc collection of programs and services as our response. That approach is not a system and there isn’t clear evidence that it actually reduces homelessness. Nor can we consider the solution to youth homelessness to be the responsibility of the homelessness sector alone.

**Third, there is a need for active, strategic and coordinated engagement by all levels of government and for interdepartmental collaboration.** In countries with evidence of success, there is recognition that all levels of government must be actively engaged in addressing youth homelessness. Different levels of government (including Aboriginal) have different resources and responsibilities. The federal government has a constitutional responsibility for housing and justice (shared with provinces) and flows funds for social and health programs to the provinces. Provincial governments fund and coordinate health care, corrections, child protection, income supports, education, housing and a number of other sectors that impact on youth homelessness. Cities and rural areas are where people live and municipal governments often provide direct services including responses to homelessness. All of these government interventions support the non-profit and private sectors to make a contribution to ending homelessness as well.

**Fourth, it is essential to adopt a youth development orientation.** The causes of youth homelessness are distinct from those of adults. Homeless youth typically lack the experience and skills to live independently. Many homeless youth are leaving the care of child welfare services. Many homeless youth will also be in the midst of important physical, psychological and emotional developmental changes. For these reasons, a strategy—and the services that support this strategy—must be distinct from the adult sector.

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## → Conclusion

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A strategy to end youth homelessness must be based on the needs of developing youth and young adults. There is a wide body of research that shows successful physical, psychological, emotional and social transitions from childhood to adulthood require attention to nutrition, strong adult support (including mentoring), a focus on educational engagement, attainment and well-being, opportunities to experiment and explore (and to make mistakes), learning to nurture healthy adult relationships (including sexual relationships), the gradual learning of skills and competencies relating to living independently, obtaining a job, etc. Not only are there developmental differences to take account of, but the diversity of the population—in terms of gender, sexual orientation and racism—also shape this experience.

The goal of any response should not merely be to help young people become independent, but rather, to assist and support their transition to adulthood and a safe, meaningful and successful life. Case management approaches can support youth transitions. As part of this process, young people need to be active and informed decision makers in their system-supported pathways to health adulthood.

**Fifth, effective plans must necessarily incorporate research, data gathering and information sharing.** In the UK, the United States and Australia, there is a much stronger commitment to the use of research and data gathering as part of their strategic responses to youth homelessness than there is in Canada. This focus should also be the case in Canada. Elements of a research-based strategy include:

- Information and data management systems to support service integration, case management and monitoring progress.
- Basic research on youth homelessness, focusing on the causes, lived experience and solutions, which makes for better policy and practice.
- Instituting a culture of evaluation in the sector (and ensuring that there are necessary resources and capacity to support this work), so that we can identify both effective practices and program models but also measure progress.
- Employing mechanisms to document and share effective practices, both within and between countries.

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## Moving Forward

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The solutions to youth homelessness do exist. If we apply the best knowledge we have to developing strategic and coordinated responses, we can end youth homelessness as a problem in Canada.

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There are indeed solutions to youth homelessness. The review of programs and practices from Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States reveals that innovation and passion combined with solid research evidence can lead to good results. Many Canadian communities and provincial governments are now interested in moving towards strategic responses to addressing the problem including understanding how we can stop the flow of young people from child protection, mental health facilities or juvenile detention into homelessness, identifying a stronger role for schools as part of the solution, helping families become stronger and offering young people a way back home. We also understand that many young people can no longer return home or in some cases have no home to go to. For these young people we need strong models of accommodation and supports that will help them move forward with their lives.

Underlying all of this is the need to make some broader changes in Canadian society. We need to ensure that there is an adequate supply of affordable housing. We need to ensure young people have the opportunity to earn a sufficient income to pay the rent, purchase food and have fulfilling lives and / or receive rent supplements if they cannot earn a living wage. We must ensure every young person has the opportunity to go to school and fulfill his or her dreams. And finally, we must work towards a society where young women, as well as LGBTQ youth and those who experience racism, can live in a world where who you are is not a limiting factor and where all young people can achieve their potential. The solutions to youth homelessness do exist. If we apply the best knowledge we have to developing strategic and coordinated responses, we can end youth homelessness as a problem in Canada.

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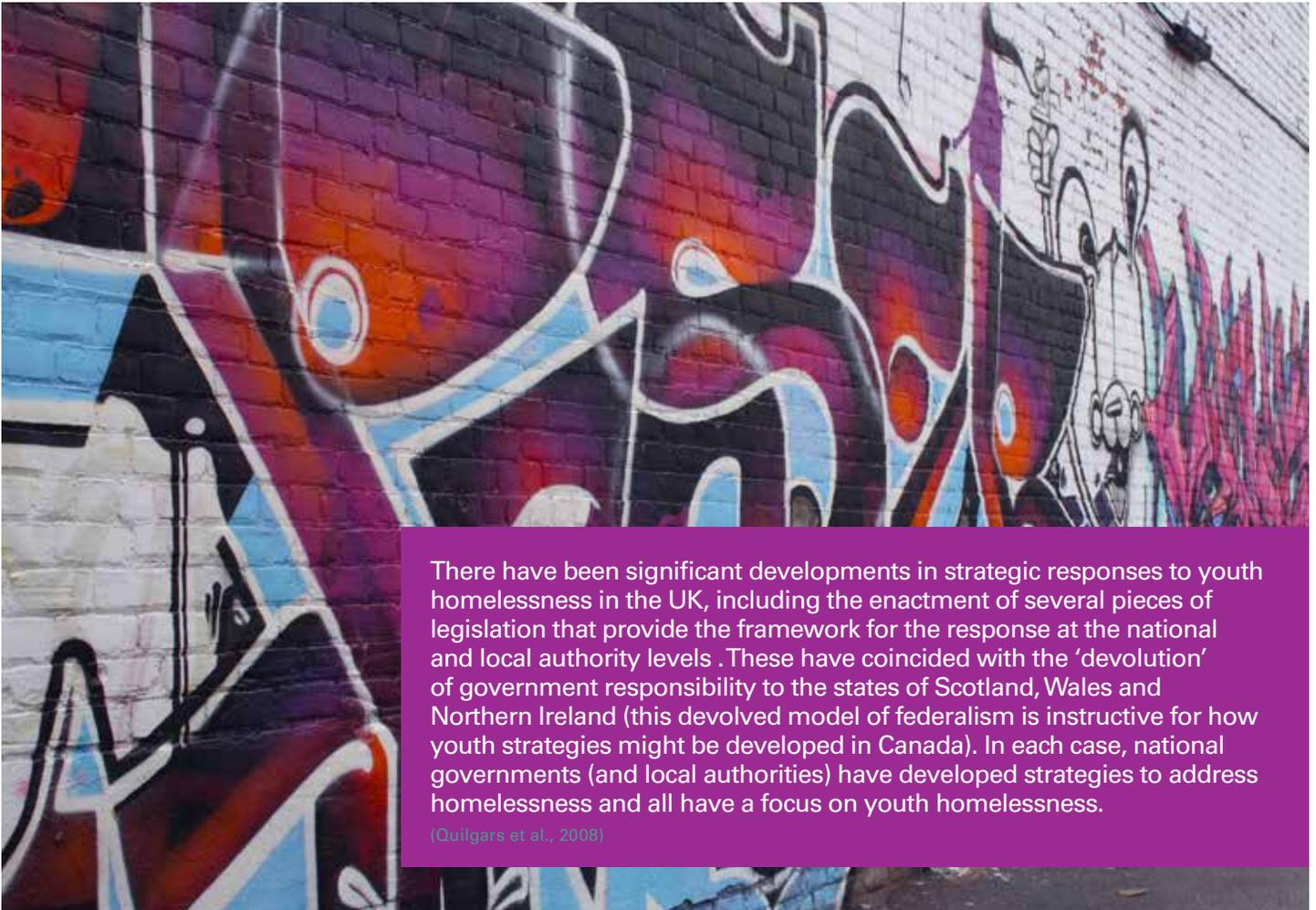
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## The Response to Youth Homelessness in the United Kingdom



There have been significant developments in strategic responses to youth homelessness in the UK, including the enactment of several pieces of legislation that provide the framework for the response at the national and local authority levels. These have coincided with the 'devolution' of government responsibility to the states of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (this devolved model of federalism is instructive for how youth strategies might be developed in Canada). In each case, national governments (and local authorities) have developed strategies to address homelessness and all have a focus on youth homelessness.

(Quilgars et al., 2008)

The National Youth Homelessness Scheme was first announced in 2006 as a national strategy to 'tackle and prevent homelessness'. The overarching goal was to have national governments and local authorities work with individual young people and their families to prevent homelessness and help youth transition to adulthood in a sustainable, safe way. Four key components of their framework include:

1. Strategic Planning and Coordination
2. Prevention
3. Accommodation
4. Wider Needs (Supports)

# Appendix A— 1

## 1. Strategic Planning and Coordination

Successful implementation of the strategy was contingent upon the development of partnerships, between policy makers, a wide network of disciplines, services and funding organizations and different sectors. Key here was the role of the not-for-profit sector (referred to in UK literature as the voluntary sector); this was not simply a government initiative.

Also central was the notion of “joint working”, which in the UK means two things: first, that agencies in the not-for-profit sector must work together in collaboration and second, that in government strategic collaboration and shared responsibility between different departments and units is absolutely necessary to deal with complex issues. Working in collaboration with different stakeholders, government’s role is to coordinate, provide some level of funding, set targets and monitor progress.

In developing a strategic approach, the NYHS identified key principles and learnings (taken from the NYHS website) that could help to inform the development of a Canadian strategy:

- Most strategies require a change in priorities, in (joint) working methods, in organizational cultures and inter-agency perceptions. Adopting positive management practices to change corporate and individual behaviours across all participating agencies has been important.
- Beneficial changes can be introduced without a formal strategic approach. However, most authorities agree that, for the reasons given above, the investment in a formal strategy has been worthwhile.
- Leadership and active participation of key influencers in the local government structure is essential to achieving objectives.
- Target milestones and outcomes for the strategy, linked to mainstream local authority strategic planning frameworks are essential to motivate influential leaders.
- Identified facilitators and project managers, with capacity to resolve problems and document partnership arrangements, act as an invaluable focus for effort and the process of change.
- Partnership work requires investment. Benefits in terms of outcomes for young people and in terms of value for money, must be the focus of the strategy and constant touchstone.

# Appendix A—2

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## 2. Prevention

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As mentioned above, central to the UK response is the focus on prevention (Pawson, 2007; Pawson et al, 2006; 2007) and there is much we can learn from this orientation. The prevention focus is particularly relevant in the response to youth homelessness, with pilot schemes developed in England near the turn of the century (Nistala & Dane, 2000; Safe in the City, 2002; Quilgars et al., 2004).

The approach to preventing youth homelessness adopted in the UK begins with recognition that remaining at home may not be an option for young people experiencing abuse. However, for most youth, they generally will have improved life chances the longer they stay with their family and the more ‘planned’ their transition to living independently is. When that move takes place will depend on a number of factors. For some, it may be best that the young person moves out at 16. Again, this should ideally occur in a safe and planned way.

The key point of a preventive approach is that young people and their families “need to be able make informed decisions about whether to live apart and, if they need it, to have access to appropriate resources and skilled support if homelessness is to be prevented” (NYHS website).

## → (2.) Prevention

Again, reflecting the ‘partnership’ approach of the UK strategy, local authorities are expected to develop interventions to be delivered in collaboration with key partners including Children's Services, the youth service, the not-for-profit sector and importantly, schools. The collaborative, cross sectoral approach is seen as necessary as a number of agencies may or should have a role in supporting young people and their families to prevent homelessness. Key elements of a preventive strategy include:

- A Strengthening services and supports** aimed at supporting children and families with complex needs who are at risk of homelessness. This includes government supports (child welfare services) as well as services provided by the not-for-profit sector.
- B Information and advice**—getting timely information and supports to young people and their families. This includes services to build resilience, raise young people’s awareness of rights, independent information and advice services and direction about where to get help.
- C Family mediation**—Based on a body of research that shows family breakdown is a huge factor in youth homelessness. The roots of breakdown can be complex and may be related to unaddressed problems experienced by young people (school, mental health, addictions, etc.), problems with family members (abuse, domestic violence, addictions, mental health) and structural problems (poverty, overcrowding, etc.). Family mediation (which may include home visits) focuses on relationships, communication, parenting skills etc., with the goal of seeking both short term and long term solutions, including: “improved relationships and communication, fewer arguments, increased self esteem and a greater willingness to accept responsibility for actions and behaviours” (NYHS website).
- D Working in Schools**—As is the case in Australia, much of the preventive work occurs in schools. This is an important consideration, because this is where young people spend much of their time and this is where one can access young people under the age of 16. It is also important that schools exist in every community and in many cases are important community hubs with high levels of parental engagement. Work in schools is often (usually) delivered by not-for-profit agencies, who are often the same ones who deliver family mediation services (this link is important). Work in schools can include education on youth homelessness, work to build self-sufficiency and resilience, conflict resolution training etc. It can also include support for parents. The idea behind: “if we can make a difference to young people’s attitudes and circumstances at a young age, there is a greater chance of them not becoming homeless” (NYHS website).
- E Assessment system**—When young people are identified (or self-identify) as being at risk for homelessness, there must be a process in place to assess the situation and determine the needs. The assessment model “is a holistic one, which looks at causes of /triggers for homelessness in a preventative framework” (NYHS website). The outcome may be that the young person in question gets access to family mediation. If it is determined that there is no immediate reconciliation possible, then the local government has a statutory responsibility to ensure they have priority need for temporary accommodation, according to the Homelessness Act (2002). Assessment services may be developed and delivered by local government, but there is recognition that partnerships with not-for-profit services may be the best route, as they may have established the expertise and best track record for working with young people and have legitimacy. Organizations that have experience and credibility in their work with young people who are homeless and which have strong knowledge and relationships with other local providers, are recommended.

# Appendix A—3

## 3. Accommodation

When young people can no longer remain at home, the NYHS is responsible for helping young people find and maintain independent accommodation. There are four streams to the accommodation strategy and they begin with emergency services and assessment:

**Emergency Services and Assessment:** Here is an interesting thing about the UK approach to youth homelessness. While emergency services are part of the response, they really are structured and conceived of as a temporary accommodation where young people go through a rigorous assessment. As a ‘triage’ service, the often intensive assessment they undergo is designed to determine if young people can go back home, or move into some form of independent living. The holistic assessment is also designed to identify other services and supports that may be necessary.

**Outreach,** though not technically a form of accommodation, is definitely tied to it. As mentioned previously, as part of the UK “rough sleeping’ strategy, a concerted effort is undertaken to locate and identify young people who are sleeping outdoors or in squats and to link them with the supports they need.

**Transitional housing:** For young people who are homeless, it is often recognized that they lack skills and experiences to live independently right away. In the UK, they have developed a range of transitional housing models to provide young people with supports they need in order to gain skills allowing them to eventually live independently. One model, the Supported Lodging Scheme, provides accommodation to young people in a family home, where they have their own bedroom but share a kitchen, bathroom and other facilities. This kind of accommodation is suitable for young people who are ready to live independently but require support. The model is not suitable for young people “who have few boundaries to their behaviour or who want the freedom and anonymity of other settings” (NYHS website). Depending on the program, stays can be short (days or weeks) to up to two years. Another approach to transitional housing is the Foyer housing model, which has a long history in the UK. This type of housing support combines longer term housing (up to two years) with more intensive life skills training support. This model has become popular world wide.

**Permanent housing:** In the language of the UK, this is referred to as “Move-on” housing option, meaning that young people are ready and able to live independently and move into either social housing or private sector housing. Move-on options for young people are schemes that provide support for people to get there. As in Canada, many emergency shelter beds are filled with young people who would fit this status, but depending on the availability of affordable housing in a given market, may or may not be able to do this with ease. The role of the sector is to help young people get into housing (and may involve different levels of supports after the fact). This may mean a proactive role in establishing relations with landlords or public housing authorities to ensure a certain number of units are available. There are a number of examples of recruiting and supporting private landlords.

# Appendix A—4

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## 4. Wider Needs (Supports)

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The National Youth Homelessness Scheme is premised on the notion that while all young people need support to make the successful transition to adulthood, young people who are homeless may face additional and complex challenges. Their upbringing and experiences may have reduced their resilience and undermined their mental, physical and emotional resources that would help them make the transition to adulthood. Ironically, given the extent of the challenges they face, they are also expected to make the transition to adulthood more quickly than housed youth.

Again, the feature that distinguishes a response to youth homelessness from a more generalized response to homelessness is the attention that must be paid to the adolescent development strand. The most effective plans in the UK identify this and build this into a range of service options. The key areas of focus include:

- 1 Health and well-being
- 2 Learning and work
- 3 Young people from BME communities (BME refers to Black and Minority communities)
- 4 Anti-social behaviour
- 5 Offenders and offending
- 6 Young people with multiple needs
- 7 Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) young people
- 8 Mentoring and befriending

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### Further Reading:

- 1 <http://www.communities.gov.uk/youthhomelessness/widerneeds/health/>
- 2 <http://www.communities.gov.uk/youthhomelessness/widerneeds/learningwork/>
- 3 <http://www.communities.gov.uk/youthhomelessness/widerneeds/bme/>
- 4 <http://www.communities.gov.uk/youthhomelessness/widerneeds/antisocialbehaviour/>
- 5 <http://www.communities.gov.uk/youthhomelessness/widerneeds/offenders/>
- 6 <http://www.communities.gov.uk/youthhomelessness/widerneeds/multipleneeds/>
- 7 <http://www.communities.gov.uk/youthhomelessness/widerneeds/lgbtmodule/>
- 8 <http://www.communities.gov.uk/youthhomelessness/widerneeds/mentoringandbefriending/>

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## Roadmap for Youth Homelessness (Australia, 2008)

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The report **Australia's Homeless Youth: A Report of the National Youth Commission into Youth Homelessness** (National Youth Commission (2008) provides a “Roadmap for Youth Homelessness” and highlights ten strategic action areas, as follows:

### **A Develop and implement a National Framework and National Homelessness Action Plan**

The national framework would include:

- A national aspirational horizon—the goal of eliminating youth homelessness by 2030;
- Appropriate structures and processes designed to work across election cycles in a bipartisan way;
- Specific targets over the short, medium and long-term;
- Strategies that set out realistically how targets will be reached;
- A youth-centred focus for service provision and programs and
- Review and public monitoring so that progress can be recognized and problems identified against the needs of homeless young people.

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### **B Affordable housing for young people**

In response to decades of policy neglect and underfunding, they propose: (a) a multi-billion dollar investment in public and community housing; (b) taxation incentives to encourage affordable private rental housing and (c) explicit policies and housing form designs and locations that facilitate access for young people. The NYC recommends:

- The development of a new national affordable housing strategy for Australia, with explicit attention to the needs of young people and in particular disadvantaged young people.

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### **C Refocus service provision on building and resourcing ‘communities of services’**

Here they are talking about the coordination of services, both across regions, but also across government departments and programs (like ‘joined thinking’ in the UK, or inter-ministerial collaboration in Canada). Their ‘communities of services’ model would will require:

- A refocus of Commonwealth and State/Territory funding for services and programs on a common community level template and
- The provision of cross-sectoral/cross-departmental resources to support the development of sustainable ‘communities of services’.

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## → Roadmap for Youth Homelessness (Australia)

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### **D Prevent homelessness by supporting 'at-risk' families**

This refers to preventive support that assists families in a practical, needs-based way before they become homeless. Research on a program called Home Advice demonstrates this is possible in 9 of 10 cases. The NYC recommends that:

- The HOME Advice program be progressively expanded as a preventive response to homelessness for families at risk of becoming homeless.
- 

### **E Resource early intervention for at risk young people**

Here they are referring to school-based programs for recently homeless young people, like Reconnect. They have plenty of research that shows the effectiveness of this approach in reducing homelessness, but feel that not enough is being done in this area. They recommend the government needs to:

- Triple funding for 'Reconnect' (from \$20 million to \$60 million per year) to reach a larger proportion of the at-risk population and ensure that every community in the nation has sufficient early intervention capacity to impact on the number of young people at-risk of homelessness or recently homeless.
- 

### **F A new national approach for the care and protection of children in all states and territories**

As in Canada and elsewhere, they recognize profound problems in their child welfare system and that young people who have been in state care are over-represented amongst the homeless. They see the need for a national approach (remember they are encumbered by a federal system of government like Canada), a national review of care and protection (urgent) and the need for aggressive reforms.

- A full Human Rights and Equal Opportunity inquiry to expose the issues and develop proposals for a national response.
  - A strengthening of care and protection for at-risk 12-17 year olds.
  - Urgent remedial attention to staff resources and incentives for experienced staff to remain in a critical but difficult area.
  - Leaving care support on a needs-basis for all young people exiting care and protection.
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### **G Ensure supported accommodation is accessible in all communities**

Supported accommodation (i.e. SAAP) remains a core component of Australia's response to homelessness and an exemplar of innovative diversity by international standards. There hasn't been growth in the program for ten years and given its success, they feel it should be expanded.

- Expand supported accommodation using a national community template to ensure that every community can adequately provide supported accommodation for young people in need.
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## → Roadmap for Youth Homelessness (Australia)

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### **H Redevelop employment, Drug and Alcohol and mental health programs for homeless young people**

Income and employment are of course necessary for any stable solution to homelessness. Addressing addictions is also important, as is mental health. They recognize the need to expand programming in all areas to target young people. TNYC calls for:

- the development a national system of accessible drug and alcohol services for young people. National funding of an estimated \$100 million would be required to deploy a system adequate to meet existing need, with an urgent need for \$20 million initially.
  - the development of a national program at an estimated cost of \$25 million, to work intensively with homeless young people who have mental health issues, their families and the workers who support them.
  - the construction a continuum of employment programs for homeless young people that incorporates JPET and offers appropriate foundation education, training, vocational options as well as new models of supported employment that builds new links with support and accommodation programs.
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### **I A new form of youth housing which links housing to education, training and employment programs**

This is an excellent focus and builds on the UK Foyer model (see page 101) as it packages accommodation with other support, particularly education and training. "Other initiatives that have been considered include accommodation for homeless school students, and 'boarding school' projects linked to Indigenous communities."The NYC recommends that:

- one-third of the \$150 million committed by the Commonwealth Government on housing for homeless people should be applied to develop a new layer of youth housing for homeless young people, connected closely to education, training and employment.
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### **J Post-vention support**

This refers to support for young people once they have obtained housing, recognizing that even when young people have housing, problems can occur and they may slip back into homelessness. They propose a tailored, outreach kind of support with the goal that every homeless young person moving beyond supported accommodation should have access to this. All young people moving from SAAP into some form of independent living need to receive needs-based outreach support.

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## Further Reading:

<http://www.homelesshub.ca/resource/australias-homeless-youth-report>

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United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH)

## Framework to End Youth Homelessness: A Resource Text for Dialogue and Action

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“The framework focuses on two complementary strategies. The strategies include a data strategy, to get to better data on the numbers and characteristics of youth experiencing homelessness and a capacity strategy, to strengthen and coordinate the capacity of Federal, State and local systems to act effectively and efficiently toward ending youth homelessness. Work related to each of these strategies is categorized within three phases. The phases include: I.) activities that can begin immediately; II.) activities that will require new resources; and III.) longer-term activities that build on earlier efforts and may require new resources and/or legislative authority. A logic model outlines the strategies and phases of the youth framework”

(USICH, 2013:3)

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### Strategy: Getting Better Data

The data strategy includes the following areas of work:

1. Developing better strategies for counting youth in Point-in-Time (PIT) counts of homelessness
2. Coordinating Federal data systems that collect information on youth experiencing homelessness and their receipt of services
3. Launching a national study on the prevalence and characteristics of youth homelessness
4. Using the national study methodology

### Strategy: Building Capacity for Impact

Better data can inform the scale of investments and the types of service delivery and coordination that are needed to end youth homelessness. In turn this information will guide work to build the capacity of systems and service providers to meet the challenge. This capacity strategy outlines a basic flow of activity for building capacity to improve youth outcomes. The planning should take into account unique needs of young people to prevent new homelessness among vulnerable youth and to prevent and eliminate chronic homelessness among youth who already survive in unsafe or unstable living arrangements. The capacity strategy includes the following areas of work:

1. Disseminating a preliminary, research-informed intervention model for approaching service delivery (See Figure 9 on next page)
2. Reviewing screening and assessment tools and effective interventions to improve youth outcomes
3. Improving service capacity for homeless youth and subpopulations
4. Implementing service strategies and evaluating those strategies

## → Appendix C

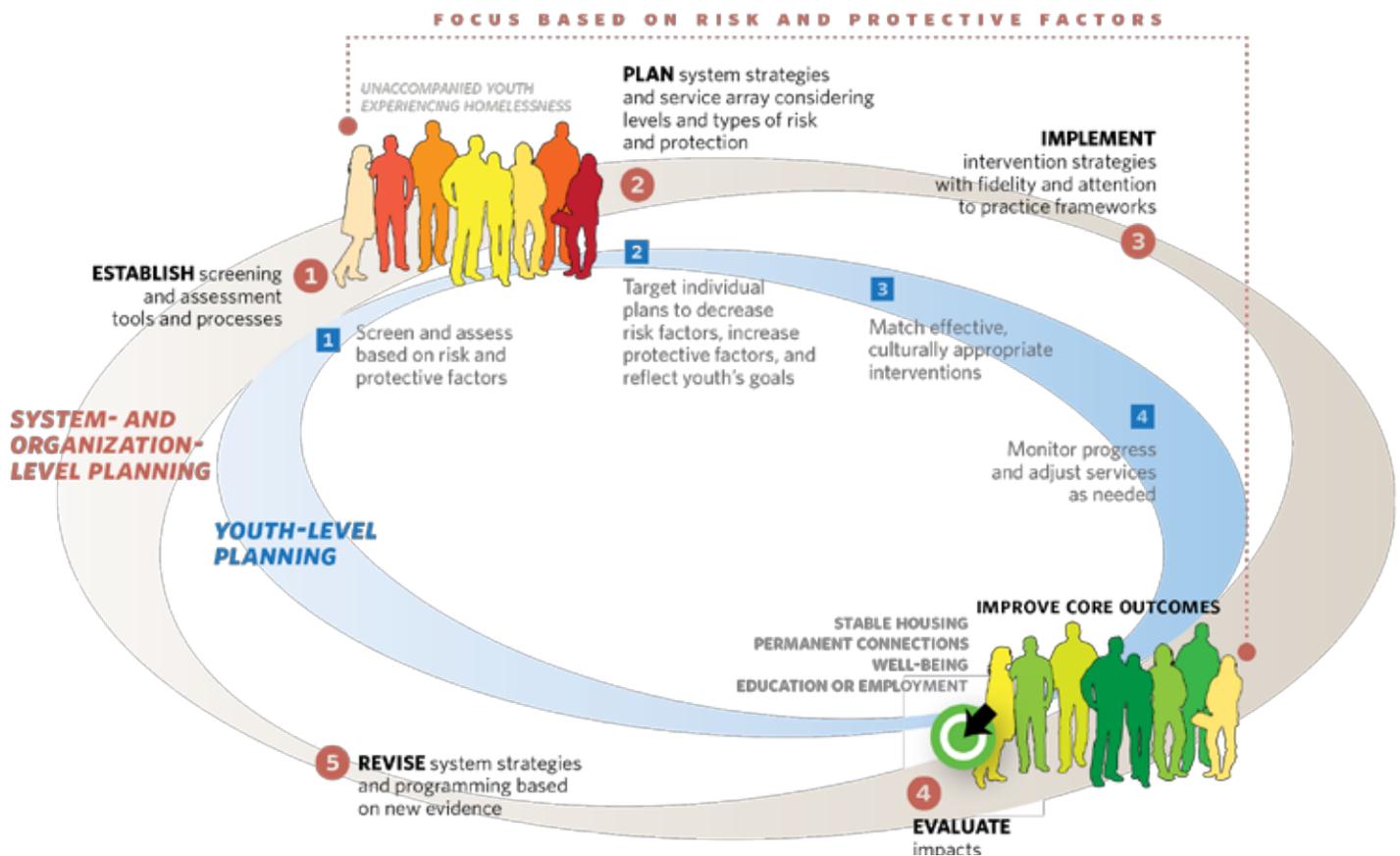


Figure 9  
Intervention Model for Approaching  
Service Delivery.

## For more information

### Download "Opening Doors"

[http://usich.gov/PDF/OpeningDoors\\_2010\\_FSPPreventEndHomeless.pdf](http://usich.gov/PDF/OpeningDoors_2010_FSPPreventEndHomeless.pdf)

### Download the youth framework slide set

[http://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset\\_library/STD\\_Youth\\_Framework\\_10\\_11\\_12\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/STD_Youth_Framework_10_11_12_FINAL.pdf)

### Download the youth framework handout in Opening Doors Amendment 2012

[http://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset\\_library/USICH\\_OD\\_Amendment\\_YouthModelsHandout.pdf](http://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/USICH_OD_Amendment_YouthModelsHandout.pdf)

### Download the youth framework

[http://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset\\_library/USICH\\_Youth\\_Framework\\_FINAL\\_02\\_13\\_131.pdf](http://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/USICH_Youth_Framework_FINAL_02_13_131.pdf)