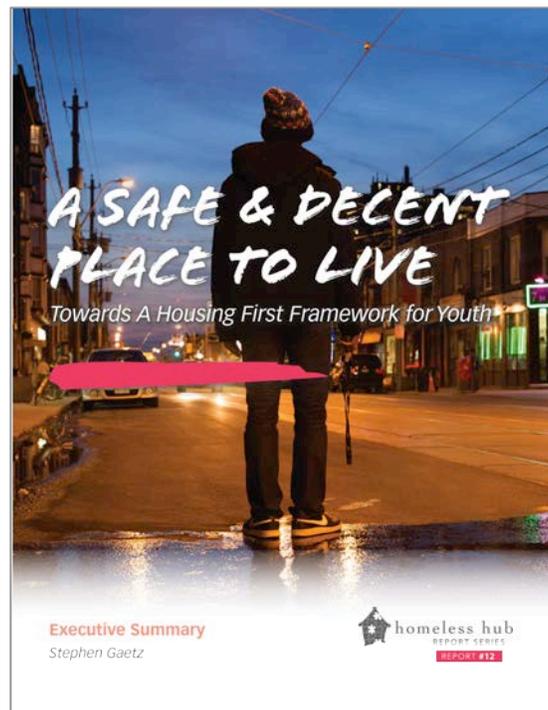


A Safe and Decent Place to Live: Towards a Housing First Framework for Youth

Executive Summary

Stephen Gaetz



Canadian Homelessness
Research Network

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Executive Summary

Across North America and elsewhere in the world, Housing First is recognized as an effective and humane approach to addressing homelessness. The need for a consideration of how Housing First works for young people (aged 13-25) is based on concerns raised by policy-makers, practitioners and indeed, young persons themselves, about the applicability of models and approaches developed for adults who are homeless, when applied to a youthful population.

The framework presented here is intended to provide communities and funders with a clear understanding of what Housing First is, and how it can work to support young people who experience, or are at risk of, homelessness. It is the outcome of a collaborative process involving the Street Youth Planning Collaborative (Hamilton) and the National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness. The framework reflects a belief that for young people the experience of homelessness – both in terms of its causes and conditions - is distinct from that which impacts adults, and therefore the solutions must reflect these important differences. We cannot take an established approach that works for adults and simply create Housing First “Junior” by changing the age mandate. If Housing First is to work for youth, it must be built upon our understanding of the developmental, social and legal needs of young persons.

The question is not “Does Housing First work for youth?”, because it works for anybody. Rather, we need to ask, “How can Housing First be adapted to meet the needs of young people who experience homelessness?”

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What *is* Housing First?

At its most basic, Housing First is considered to be:

“a recovery-oriented approach to homelessness that involves moving people who experience homelessness into independent and permanent housing as quickly as possible, with no preconditions and then providing them with additional services and supports as needed. The underlying principle of Housing First is that people are more successful in moving forward with their lives if they are first housed. This is as true for homeless people and those with mental health and addiction issues as it is for anyone. Housing is not contingent upon readiness, or on ‘compliance’ (for instance, sobriety). Rather, it is a rights-based intervention rooted in the philosophy that all people deserve housing and that adequate housing is a precondition for recovery.” (Gaetz, 2013: 12)

Housing First means more than simply providing people with housing. It also means ensuring that people get the supports they need and desire, in ways that support their move to independence, or in the case of young people, their transition to adulthood. There is a substantial body of research that convincingly demonstrates Housing First’s general effectiveness, when compared to ‘treatment first’ approaches. In fact, it is one of the few homelessness interventions that can definitely be considered to be a “best practice”.

Can Housing First Work for Youth?

Housing First programs – including the Pathways model and the *At Home/Chez Soi* project – specifically prioritize chronically homeless persons with significant mental health and addictions issues. While the question, “Does Housing First work for adults?” has effectively been answered; whether and how it works for youth still remains an askable question.

It is argued here that for young people, the need to get them into housing with appropriate supports as soon as possible is paramount. We know from research that the longer a young person is absolutely homeless or comes to rely on emergency services, the greater their entrenchment in the street youth lifestyle, the more estranged they become from mainstream services, the worse their health (mental health and addictions) becomes, and the greater likelihood of their experiencing crime and violence, as well as sexual and economic exploitation.

“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 Core Principles of Housing First for Youth

“Any and all homelessness interventions must take account of the fact that youth homelessness is distinct from adult homelessness, both in terms of its causes and consequences.”

1. Immediate Access to Housing with No Preconditions

Key to the Housing First philosophy is that individuals and families are not required to first demonstrate that they are ‘ready’ for housing. At the same time, housing is not conditional on sobriety or abstinence. Immediate access to appropriate housing and supports is particularly crucial for young people and every effort should be made to divert them from long stays in emergency shelters.

2. Youth Choice and Self-Determination.

Housing First is a rights-based, client-centred approach that emphasizes client choice in terms of housing and supports.

- **Housing** – Young people are able to exercise some choice regarding the location and type of housing they receive (e.g. neighbourhood, congregate setting, scattered site, etc.).
- **Supports** – Young people have choices in terms of what services they receive and when to start using services.
- **Access to opportunities for education and training** – For a long-term and sustainable impact on the lives of young people, they should be encouraged and supported to (re)engage in education and, where appropriate, employment training.
- **Harm Reduction** - A core philosophy of virtually all approaches to Housing First is that there should be no requirement of sobriety or abstinence. Harm reduction aims to reduce the risks and harmful effects associated with substance use and addictive behaviours for the individual, the community and society as a whole, without requiring abstinence.

3. Positive Youth Development Orientation.

The focus of Housing First for youth is not merely a successful transition to independent living, but rather, is on supporting a healthy transition to adulthood. Accommodation and supports must first be designed and implemented in recognition of the developmental needs and challenges of youth and second, foster and enable a transition to adulthood and wellness based on a positive strengths-based approach.

4. Individualized and Client-Driven Supports.

A client-driven approach recognizes that all young people are unique individuals and so are their needs. Once housed, some people will need few, if any, supports while other people will need supports for the rest of their lives (this could range from case management to assertive community treatment). Supports may address housing stability, health and mental health needs and life skills.

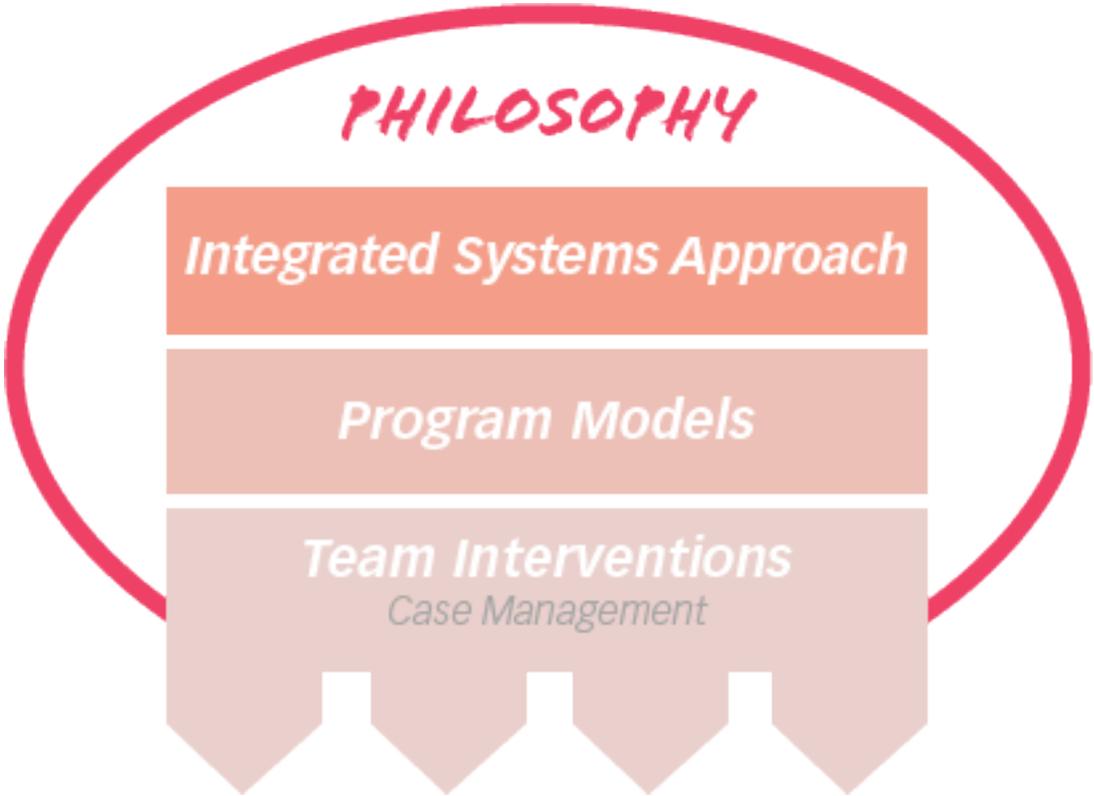
5. Social and Community Integration.

Part of the Housing First strategy is to help people integrate into their community and this requires socially supportive engagement and the opportunity to participate in meaningful activities. This means housing should not lead to the stigmatization or isolation of clients; young people should have opportunities for social and cultural engagement; support for family reconnection, and opportunities for participation in meaningful activities through employment, vocational and recreational activities.

Application

In order to fully understand how Housing First is applied in different contexts, it is important to consider different models. While there are core principles that guide its application, it is worth distinguishing Housing First in terms of: a) a *philosophy*, b) a *systems approach*, c) *program models* and d) *team interventions*.

Figure 1: Application of Housing First



The Application of Housing First for Youth

Philosophy

As a philosophy, Housing First can be a guiding principle for an organization or community that prioritizes getting young people into housing with supports to follow. It is the belief that all young people deserve housing and that people who are homeless will do better and recover more effectively if they are first provided with housing.

Systems Approach

Within a 'system of care' approach, all services and program elements within the youth homelessness sector are guided by the principles of the model. While not all youth homelessness interventions are Housing First programs (Housing First being one of many potential interventions), each service should be expected to support the Housing First agenda, with each having a specific role to play in the larger system.

Program Models

Housing First can be considered more specifically as a program when it is operationalized as a service delivery model or set of activities provided by an agency or government body. It is important to note that there is not a single program model for Housing First and that it can take many forms.

Case Management

Young people have complex needs, but these may be profoundly different than those associated with adult homeless populations. A Housing First framework for youth must place client-centred case management at the centre of the work in order to organize and coordinate the delivery of services. For many young people, Housing First case management may also be delivered by smaller teams who help match the young person to the supports they need to obtain and maintain appropriate housing and that they access age appropriate supports to assist in their transition to adulthood and achieve an optimum quality of life developing plans,

enhancing life skills, addressing health and mental health needs, engaging in meaningful activities and building social and community relations.

“While not all youth homelessness interventions are Housing First programs (Housing First being one of many potential interventions), each service should be expected to support the Housing First agenda, with each having a specific role to play in the larger system.”

Accommodation

A key principle of Housing First is **Consumer Choice and Self-Determination**. In other words, people should have some kind of choice as to what kind of housing they receive and where it is located.

Figure 2: Models of Accommodation within a Housing First Framework for Youth



Returning Home

Within this framework, one of the potential housing outcomes of Housing First is for young people to return to the home of their parents and/or to the home of a significant adult including relatives, godparents, family friends. Returning home is best supported through programs and services that adopt a **family reconnect** orientation. The supports offered young people and their families should extend beyond simply assisting with the return home. Ongoing counselling and support may be necessary to ensure housing stability. While ideal for some young people, returning home may not be safe, desirable or even possible for other young people.

Permanent Supportive Housing

Youth whose health and mental health needs are acute and chronic may require **Permanent Supportive Housing** (PSH). This is a more integrated model of housing and services for individuals with complex and co-occurring issues where the clinical services and landlord role are often performed by the same organization.

Transitional Housing

Transitional housing may be more appropriate for some youth, as they may not have attained the necessary life skills, independence and maturity to maintain their own apartment (while others will). Perhaps more importantly, one has to consider the isolation and loneliness that can result from a rapid move to independence. Many young people prefer a more congregate environment as they learn independence, because moving into one's own place often means leaving their street friends behind, a transition that can be difficult to navigate. All young people who access such accommodation must eventually be supported to move into independent living (with supports) at some point. This can be achieved through housing supports that help young people locate safe and appropriate housing.

Independent living

This model of accommodation refers to situations where young people obtain and maintain their own or shared permanent housing in either the private market or the social housing sector. Depending on the needs and desires of the young person in question, they will also have access to a range of services and supports. 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 success of the Infinity Project in Calgary attests to the viability of this model for many young people.

It should be noted that a key barrier to successful implementation of Housing First is the lack of affordable housing, which is particularly acute in some markets. While this presents challenges to housing anyone who is homeless, for the young the problems can be compounded. Unemployment rates tend to be much higher for youth and those that are able to gain employment typically wind up with low wage, part time jobs, meaning maintaining housing over the long run is difficult. In tight markets young people may also face age discrimination.

Supports

Housing First is about much more than housing. It means ensuring young people are provided with adequate and appropriate supports are in place to facilitate this transition, regardless of the kind of housing a young person is in. These supports must be driven by the needs of the client, rather than the structure of the program, and should be designed and delivered from a ‘positive youth development’ perspective. For ensuring housing stability and a transition to adulthood, the following social and health supports should be provided:

1. Housing Supports

Central to Housing First is the need for housing support, which not only means enabling people to access housing, but helping them to maintain it. Given that many homeless youth will have little or no experience in finding and maintaining accommodation, housing supports are essential. This includes:

- **Help in obtaining housing** — Young people should receive support in searching for, and obtaining, housing that is safe, affordable and appropriate.
- **Housing Retention** — Getting housing is one thing, maintaining it and keeping it is another. Housing retention means helping young people learn how to take care of and maintain housing, pay rent on time, develop good relations with landlords and neighbours or deal with friends.
- **Rent Supplements** — Given the low earning power and lack of education of many youth, providers should ensure that young people have access to income supports. It is recommended that young people pay no more than 30% of their income on rent, while in the program.
- **Support when things go wrong** — A successful Housing First agenda must be supported by a “zero discharge into homelessness” philosophy, so that housing stability and crisis management become key.

- **Aftercare** — When young people achieve some level of housing stability, continued contact with support workers is encouraged, and young people should be given the option of moving back to a more supportive housing environment if necessary.

2. Supports for Health and Well-being

First teams often speak of a recovery-oriented approach to clinical supports designed to enhance well-being, mitigate the effects of mental health and addictions challenges, improve quality of life and foster self-sufficiency. Key areas of clinical support include:

- **Trauma-informed care** — Because many young people who become homeless often have experienced trauma during their childhood, in the form of family violence, sexual abuse, etc., and may have suffered exploitation on the streets, it is essential that those providing housing first supports practice trauma-informed care.
- **Mental health** — Considerable research identifies the degree to which many homeless youth experience mental health challenges. 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.
- **Substance use and addictions** — 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.
- **Harm Reduction** — Housing First programs should necessarily incorporate a ‘harm reduction’ philosophy and approach that are best suited to young people.
- **Healthy Sexuality** — Sexual health is a central feature of physical, emotional and social health and well-being that influences individuals of all ages.

3. Supporting Access to Income and Education

It is well established that Inadequate income and employment are well documented as causes of and contributing factors to, young people cycling in and out of homelessness. Supporting young people to earn an income and obtain an education is an important task of Housing First, and is key to addressing housing stability in the long term.

- **Education** — Many young people who are homeless have dropped out of school at a young age. Given the centrality of education in our understanding of what helps young people grow into healthy independent adults, support with (re)engagement with school should be a central feature of Housing First supports for youth.
- **Employment Training** — Successful models of training for homeless youth focus on not only training, but wrap around supports to help facilitate the transition to stable employment as young people to move into adulthood.
- **Income and Employment** — Young people in a Housing First program should be encouraged to obtain work, even if they are in school. This becomes not only a means of generating income, but also presents an opportunity to learn how to budget, work with employers and colleagues etc.

4. Complementary Supports

Complementary supports are designed to facilitate housing stabilization and to help individuals and families improve their quality of life, integrate into the community and potentially achieve self-sufficiency.

- **Life Skills** — Young people should have access to programs, mentoring and individual support focusing on the enhancement of self-care and life skills.

- **Adult Support and Mentoring** — Having caring, supportive and consistent adults in one’s life is important to any adolescent and young adult. This kind of support can be intentional, for instance through case management, a teacher, trainer or coach, or it can be provided by other staff and volunteers who take an interest in and show respect for a young person.
- **Family Reconnection** — Family reconnection (and reunification) for homeless youth is an intervention that offers individual and family support for young people who become, or are at risk of becoming, homeless.
- **Supporting Youth with Children** — Young people who are parents should be supported if they wish to re-establish relationships with their children and potentially have them move back home with them.
- **Anti-Discrimination Environment** — Although homelessness is stigmatizing for all young people who experience it, many are doubly and triply marginalized due to racism, sexism, trans-phobia and homophobia. The first rule of supports for homeless youth should be to do no harm.
- **Advocacy** — Navigating systems can be challenging, so providing support becomes important in 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.

5. Opportunities for Meaningful Engagement

Key to any young person’s transition to adulthood and well-being is the ability of young people to nurture positive relationships with others, connect to communities and become involved in activities that are meaningful and fulfilling.

- **Developing Social Relationships** — Young people should be supported in developing positive relationships with peers, adults, employers and colleagues and landlords etc.

- **Community Engagement** — The opportunity to engage with communities of choice – whether people and institutions in the local neighbourhood, or making cultural connections (see below) is an important part of the Housing First agenda.
- **Cultural Engagement** — Cultural and spiritual connections are important for many people. If young people desire this, they should be supported in engaging cultural and spiritual traditions that support their growth.
- **Meaningful Activities** — Young people should be provided with the opportunity to participate in meaningful activities such as arts, sports, volunteering etc. in order to learn skills, develop relationships and social skills.

Conclusion

As a *philosophy*, Housing First can be a guiding principle for an organization or community wanting to end youth homelessness. Housing First is important because it prioritizes getting young people into housing as quickly as possible, with supports to follow. It is the belief that all people deserve housing and that people who are homeless will do better and recover more effectively if they are first provided with housing. Employing a positive youth framework means drawing on the strengths, dreams and talents of young people to support them on their path to adulthood.

Addressing youth homelessness through Housing First means youth-focused approaches. This requires a consideration of different models of accommodation, and an expansion of services and supports to assist young people to successfully transition to adulthood and wellness, not merely to independence. This means not only support for obtaining and maintaining housing, but also supports that enhance health and well-being. It means ensuring young people have access to income and that if possible they can re-engage with education. Life skills development is important for young people who will have little experience of living independently. Finally, young people need opportunities for meaningful engagement. This includes not only building social relationships and community connections, but engaging in activities that bring meaning and a sense of well-being to young people. In planning and implementing Housing First, it is necessary to demonstrate fidelity to the core principles of the model, and to ensure that a range of housing options and appropriate supports are in place prior to implementation.

The Framework for Housing First for Youth outlined here is intended to provide a starting point for communities, policy-makers and practitioners interested in applying the model to adolescents and young adults. Housing First does not promise or pretend to be the only approach to addressing youth homelessness. However, it can and should become an important intervention that supports and in turn is supported by other preventive and early intervention

strategies, short term emergency supports, etc. Under the broader umbrella of strategies to end youth homelessness, Housing First has an important place.

“It is the belief that all people deserve housing and that people who are homeless will do better and recover more effectively if they are first provided with housing.”

To learn more about Housing First for Youth, see the full report:

Gaetz, Stephen. (2014). ***A Safe and Decent Place to Live: Towards a Housing First Framework for Youth.*** Toronto: The Homeless Hub Press.

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