
No Strings Attached: Helping Vulnerable Youth with Non-Time-Limited Supportive Housing

Over the last six years, the United States has advanced the goal of preventing and ending homelessness for families, youth and children by 2020. Supportive housing is one approach that has been gaining traction in communities all over the country to best serve high-need youth. Youth supportive housing is an age-appropriate model that links stable affordable housing with wraparound support services. Recently there has been much discussion over time or age restrictions on supportive housing for youth, and fears that without these limits, tenants may never move out. As a result of those fears and limitations on service funding¹, most youth supportive housing programs have age or length of stay restrictions. But locally and nationally, several non-time-limited youth supportive housing programs are showing positive outcomes demonstrating youth are indeed moving out steadily as they are ready. Minnesota-based YouthLink, for example, has a non-time-limited supportive housing program called Nicollett Square with an average length of stay of two years. In 2015, 90% of YouthLink exits were to safe, affordable housing and the other 10% were exits to family reunification or a more appropriate housing program. In New York City, West End Residences' True Colors Residences confirms that over 50% of the youth housed in 2011 in their non-time-limited housing have moved on to other independent living.

In late 2015, New York City's Mayor De Blasio committed to creating 15,000 new units of supportive housing over the next 15 years, with a portion of the units being set aside for young adults. To help inform the program and financing models created under this initiative; this paper highlights the outcomes of West End Residence's True Colors Residence, the first non-time-limited youth supportive housing program in New York City. The paper will introduce the target population, explore the model and outcomes from the first cohort of youth tenants, and will conclude with recommendations for the City's next round of youth supportive housing funding.

The supportive housing model discussed in this brief is targeted to youth with service needs, which may include mental health or substance use disorders. It is important to note that there are youth who have housing affordability challenges but otherwise could live independently with limited supports. For these youth, the most appropriate housing solution might be an affordable unit, a rental subsidy, or public housing. These resources must also be in place for supportive housing to be effectively targeted to our most vulnerable youth.

¹ Local Child Welfare Agencies (CWAs) often provide funding for services in youth supportive housing for youth aging out of the child welfare system. CWA have age restrictions on their funds.

Target Population

Youth supportive housing is an intervention for the highest-need youth, those with mental health and/or substance use disorders. Homeless youth have high rates of substance use disorders, trauma, and mental health disorders.^{2,3} An estimated 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBT, and they experience trauma and mental health disorders at an even higher rate than their heterosexual counterparts.⁴ Some homeless youth “aged out” of or left the child welfare system. Older youth in foster care and those ‘aging out’ are acutely at risk of poor outcomes including homelessness, teen pregnancy, criminal justice involvement, low educational attainment, chronic unemployment and ill-health.⁵ In fact, 84% of foster care youth ages 17 and older demonstrate trauma and/or mental health symptoms; one in four youth who age out are incarcerated within two years.^{6,7}

A recent assessment of 2013 data by CSH estimated that there are 2,971 homeless unaccompanied youth in need of supportive housing each year in New York State, with 2,056 in New York City and 915 in the rest of the State.⁸ A subset of these youth has aged out of the child welfare system. In 2013, 451 youth who had recently aged out of child welfare entered the NYC shelter system.⁹

A Non-Time Limited Approach

In 2011, West End Residences opened New York’s first non-time-limited youth supportive housing program, True Colors Residence. Located in Harlem, True Colors Residence has thirty studio apartments each equipped with their own kitchens and bathroom, and community spaces for on-site service and program delivery.¹⁰ Tenants have leases and are responsible for paying rent, calculated at 30% of their income. The program is targeted to young adults between ages of 18-24 (at entry), homeless LGBT individuals with a portion having active substance use disorders.¹¹ True Colors utilizes a Housing First harm reduction and trauma-informed care approach, with comprehensive support services available on a purely voluntary basis and tailored to each individual.¹² There are no time or age restrictions on True Colors residents.¹³

² Michele D. Kipke , Susanne B. Montgomery , Thomas R. Simon , Ellen F. Iverson “Substance Abuse” Disorders among Runaway and Homeless Youth. *Substance Use & Misuse* Vol. 32, Issue 7-8, 1997

³ Feitel, Barbara, et al. "Psychosocial background and behavioral and emotional disorders of homeless and runaway youth." *Psychiatric Services* 43.2 (1992): 155-159.

⁴ Whitbeck, Les B., et al. "Mental disorder, subsistence strategies, and victimization among gay, lesbian, and bisexual homeless and runaway adolescents." *Journal of sex research* 41.4 (2004): 329-342.

⁵ Mark Courtney et. al. “Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Ages 23 and 24”, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

⁶ Griffin, G; et al. (2011). Addressing the impact of trauma before diagnosing mental health in child welfare. *Child Welfare*. 90(6):69.

⁷ Pew Charitable Trust and Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, (2007). “Time for Reform: Aging Out and On Their Own”

⁸ CSH, “Real Supportive Housing Need in New York State: a statewide supportive housing needs assessment based on data collected and evaluated by CSH” October 2015. http://www.csh.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Final_Real-SH-Need-in-NYS.pdf

⁹ *Ibid.* Data provided by DHS that includes by borough, the number of young adults 18-24 who were discharged from the foster care system at any point between 2004 – 2013 and entered shelter in 2013 by borough of previous residence.

¹⁰ Residents also have access to shared indoor and outdoor community space, a computer lounge, a small library, and laundry facilities.

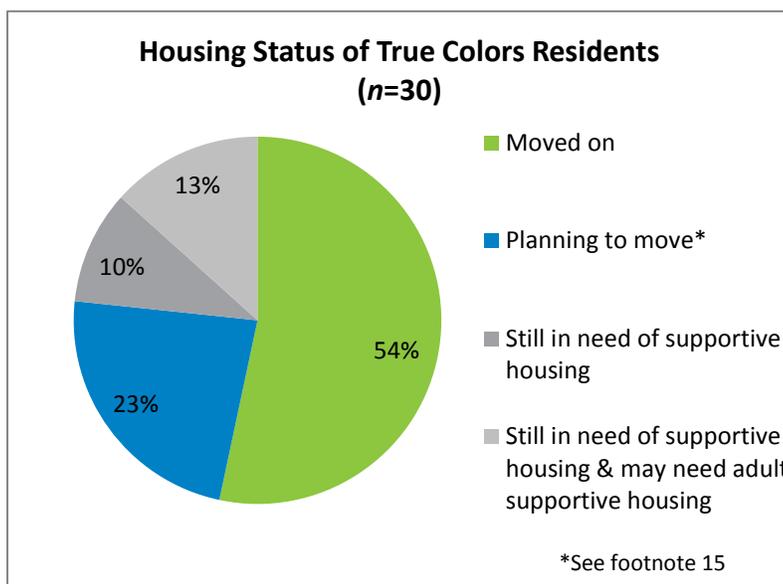
¹¹ 60% of True Colors Residence units are funded under NY/NY III Population E (described in footnote 13), persons with active substance use disorders. 23 of the 30 units meet the HUD disability criteria, and are referrals from the NYC Department of Youth and Community Development.

¹² Supportive services include counseling, benefits advocacy, HIV/AIDS counseling and education, medication management, job readiness and financial assistance and independent living skills including financial management, nutrition, and healthy living.

¹³ True Colors Residence is funded through the New York-New York III supportive housing production initiative, which created 15,000 new units of supportive housing across nine population groups. While two of these populations were exclusively for youth, True Colors

Rather than having an age or time limit in this youth supportive housing model, True Colors Residence fosters a culture of moving on. The concept of “moving on” refers to enabling stable tenants of supportive housing who no longer require on-site services to transition to another affordable independent apartment. Consistent with the recovery model, this strategy offers the individual moving on the greatest level of choice while the vacated unit or another unit in the same complex can be utilized by a vulnerable youth in need of supportive housing. Staff work to engage youth at their own pace and offer tailored services to meet their needs. When youth are ready, staff support youth in defining and working towards their goals for mental and physical health, employment and education, and moving to independent living. When a youth no longer needs services and is ready to move on, they are provided a subsidy or other resources to become stable. Without a rigid time limit, youth move on when they are ready, and youth with higher service needs have the time they need to address them.

Data on the first cohort of True Colors residents indicates success with this approach.¹⁴ Of the initial 30 youth who moved in between August and December of 2011, 53.3% of youth have already moved on to other independent housing. At time of move out, these youth were between the ages of 22-27, with the average age of 23.4 years. The average length of stay was 23.6 months. Of the remaining 14 current residents, seven are in the process of moving on.¹⁵ The average age of this group is 25.3 years old, and has an average length of stay of 50.9 months, or 4.2 years. If these youth move on as anticipated, 72% of the residents will have



moved on within the first five years of the program. True Colors staff are still in contact with former residents to serve as a support network. True Colors staff reports that 11 of the 16 youth moved on to other affordable, independent housing, four are living with roommates or a partner and one moved to residential psychiatric care and has since moved into stable housing. None of the former True Colors youth are in shelter.

The other seven youth (23%) are still in need of the affordable housing and support services provided to them at True Colors Residence, and they are not ready to move on yet. Similar to the group in the process of moving on, the average age of this group is 26 years old, and their current length of stay is 50.4 months, or 4.2 years. Three of these youth demonstrate serious mental health disorders and one has substance use and behavioral health issues that may require a higher level of care. For these reasons, these four youth may not be able to live independently in the near future and the most appropriate moving on plan would be to an adult supportive housing program.

serves an otherwise adult population group, “Population E: Substance Abuse, Active”. This is defined as single adults who have been homeless for at least 6 months of the last year and who have a substance abuse disorder that is a primary barrier to independent living.

¹⁴ Data snapshot provided by West End Residences HDFC to CSH in February 2016.

¹⁵ Youth in the process of moving on have applied to the NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development for their tenant-based voucher, and plan to move within 90 days of receiving the voucher. One can conservatively assume that all of the youth in this group will move by the end of 2016.

As a result of the units that have opened up when tenants move on, True Colors Residence has been able to serve 47 youth in the first 4.5 years of the program. After the first cohort group of 30 youth, 17 youth have moved into True Colors Residence (between July 2012 and December 2015). One of these youth moved on after 22 months, and four are in the process of moving on with an average length of stay of 28.5 months. The 12 other current tenants have been residents for 22 months.

Promising Practice

The data suggest that non-time-limited supportive housing is effective in providing youth the appropriate dose of affordable housing and support services. Youth who no longer need services are able and incentivized to move on with a tenant-based housing subsidy. The data show that more than half of the youth moved on in an average of under 2 years. In fact, if the youth who have applied for their housing subsidy move on as planned, 72% of the residents will have moved on within the first five years of the program.

The data also show that True Colors Residence has identified youth who may need a higher level of services or adult supportive housing long-term due to serious mental illness. Provider flexibility to determine when a young adult is able to move on or move to a more appropriate placement is critical to the effectiveness of this model. The model allows the provider to identify higher-need youth, serve them as long as appropriate and, if necessary, transition them to a more appropriate setting according to their individual needs. This group could otherwise spend adulthood cycling between the shelter system, emergency rooms, the criminal justice system, and other public systems. Given that these are young adults, the human and public cost averted by these youth being identified and appropriately served is enormous.

“Some communities are beginning to find success with housing for youth that does not include traditional time limits or programmatic requirements. Many of these programs also provide trauma-informed services that address the physical, socio-emotional, intellectual, and life skills development of youth on a pathway to independence.”

-US Interagency Council on Homelessness

A Call to Action

CSH recommends **that the City should fund non-time-limited youth supportive housing models**. In line with supportive housing best practices and housing first principles, awards should only be made to programs where tenants have leases and providers will be able to create an individual moving on plan based on the youth's service needs, rather than an age restriction.¹⁶

For this model to work effectively:

- 1) **The City should commit to using Project-Based Section 8 vouchers to finance youth supportive housing creation under this initiative.** Project-Based Voucher assistance is an excellent resource for a Moving On program due to the opportunity for a mobile tenant-based voucher to be issued to residents as they Move On. After the first year of occupancy, a tenant may request to relocate and to be issued a tenant-based Section 8 voucher. If a voucher is not immediately available, the tenant should get priority to receive the next voucher or other tenant-based rental assistance that becomes available. The program unit voucher will then be backfilled and allow another youth to enter the original supportive housing unit and/or another unit in the same building. The supportive housing provider will remain in contact with the youth who have “moved on” through ongoing support.
- 2) **Youth in supportive housing should maintain eligibility for other supportive housing programs throughout their tenancy.** There is a small portion of tenants who may not be able to live stably on their own due to a serious mental health disorder. In these cases, the best moving on strategy is to secure adult supportive housing for the young adult to continue receiving the services they need to stay safe and stably housed, in an age-appropriate model. Therefore, it is critical that these tenants have the ability to access adult supportive housing without entering shelter. Under NY/NY III, youth tenants would need to become homeless before being eligible to transfer to an adult or family unit.¹⁷ Additionally, maintaining eligibility would allow young adults who become pregnant or become a parent to access family supportive housing without first becoming homeless.
- 3) **The City should implement targeting measures to ensure that the units are targeted to the highest-need youth.** The City should review data from the Administration for Children Services (ACS), Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), Department of Homeless Services (DHS) and Department of Corrections (DOC) to identify risk factors to youth becoming homeless or incarcerated later in life. Recent administrative data matches of this population in New York City have shown that adolescents involved in the foster care and justice systems, and in particular those who are dually involved, are at risk for continued involvement in various systems throughout their young adulthood.¹⁸ To develop targeting criteria for the young adults we suggest reviewing data-informed targeting tools such as the Transition Age Youth Triage Tool which determines the risk of a young adult remaining homeless as an adult or being long-term homeless without intervention.¹⁹

¹⁶ CSH Dimensions of Quality in Supportive Housing, Second Edition. http://www.csh.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/CSH_Dimensions_of_Quality_Supportive_Housing_guidebook.pdf, 2013.

¹⁷ Taking Stock of the New York/New York III Supportive Housing Agreement. Moving on, pp. 17. The Network. 2014.

¹⁸ Young Adult Outcomes of Foster Care, Justice, and Dually Involved Youth in New York City. Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence (CIDL) New York City Office of the Mayor. Supported by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. June 2014.

¹⁹ The TAY Triage Tool: A Tool to Identify Homeless Transition Age Youth Most in Need of Permanent Supportive Housing. Eric Rice, Ph.D. CSH. November 2013. http://www.csh.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/TAY_TriageTool_2014.pdf