



Best Practices in Serving Youth

Like people of all ages, young people need a stable home to serve as a platform for achieving life goals. Stable housing makes it easier for youth to access health care, find and sustain employment, pursue education and become self-sufficient. Without stable housing, youth are at greater risk of physical and sexual victimization as well as mental health, and/or substance use issues. Unfortunately, there are youth each night in the United States who do not have a safe place to call home. Although there are some youth whose experiences with homelessness are short and do not recur, others need supportive housing without a predetermined length of stay in order to be successful. Some of these youth can benefit from living in supportive housing.

In designing and delivering services to youth in supportive housing observe the following principles to ensure you meet the needs of this group:

Design with the Special Needs of Homeless Youth in Mind

Many homeless youth have been neglected or abused by parents and guardians, or have experienced trauma such as exposure to violence. Consequently, many homeless youth have become distrustful of adult authority figures and some may exhibit symptoms associated with experiencing trauma. While individual youth will be impacted by trauma differently, many trauma survivors have difficulty trusting others, experience constant concern for their own safety, have difficulty managing and expressing their feelings, and have little belief in their own self-worth. Therefore, providers should take a “trauma-informed” approach to the design of supportive services and housing for youth. Further, providers of supportive housing should understand that many homeless youth have long histories of involvement with public services systems and institutions, and they may be hesitant to participate in supportive services that are highly structured or housing that feels institutional. Offering flexible supportive services that are responsive to the needs of individual young adults will be essential for engaging youth and assisting them toward stable, independent futures.

Design Flexible Intake and Admission Processes

Youth housing providers report that young adults may be initially critical of the housing options offered to them and may express reluctance to participate in services. However, it is common for youth to later change their minds about housing options, and to be easily engaged in services, once they are housed. Intake and admission processes that allow youth to change their minds regarding whether to accept an apartment, and that do not emphasize statements of interest in services as criteria for admission, will best serve young adults. In addition, many young adults may not have the skills necessary to navigate complex admission processes. Therefore, intake processes should be streamlined and require as few appointments and as little follow-up by the young adult, as possible.

Infuse an Understanding of Adolescent Development into Program

Services providers must be able to distinguish normal feelings and behaviors among adolescents (such as moodiness, being childish when stressed, testing limits and rules, and experimenting with drugs and sex), from feelings and behaviors which may signal that the youth has unmet mental health and/or substance abuse treatment needs. Providers also need to understand youth culture and adapt their programs accordingly. For example, young adults generally keep late hours – therefore, offering late hours when youth can access supportive services and public spaces such as



laundry rooms or computer centers, will be appropriate. Evenings and weekends are critical times to offer structured activities and recreation, because these are the times when young adults might otherwise engage in less positive activities.

Embrace Positive Youth Development

This framework emphasizes youths' strengths and assumes that young people will make good choices if they have the opportunity to develop social, moral, emotional, physical and cognitive competencies. Positive Youth Development programs focus on providing youth with opportunities to develop the skills they need in an environment that promotes safety and structure, belonging and membership, self-worth and the ability to contribute, independence and control over one's life, positive relationships, and personal competence. Inside this empowering framework, it is appropriate to treat youth as partners in program development and service delivery. Therefore, creating venues in which youth can provide input is a priority. Creating leadership opportunities for young adults — leading group sessions, mentoring other tenants or serving on an advisory board — supports the development of young adults' self-esteem and provides them with opportunities to practice skills for future success.

Emphasize Employment

Employment can play a key role in permanently ending homelessness, by helping youth gain confidence in their abilities and self-worth, while generating income, creating independence and reducing their future reliance on entitlements. Young adults may need considerable support to learn job-seeking skills, find employment, develop job skills and retain employment.

Acknowledge that Youth are Inherently in Transition

Young adults' service needs and goals will change over time and will require an approach to service delivery that is responsive as they mature. While supportive housing for youth is permanent, it should be expected that many young adults will eventually outgrow it and move on to independent living in the community or to other permanent supportive housing that is not youth-focused. Teaching and assisting youth to find and maintain positive permanent living arrangements, when they are ready to move on, is a crucial part of serving youth effectively.

The [Project Profiles](#) section of CSH's Quality Supportive Housing Toolkit includes existing supportive housing projects that are serving youth and young adults and have designed their services with the needs of that population in mind.