YHDP Lessons Learned

July 2018

In January 2017, HUD awarded funding to 10 communities for the first cohort of grantees under the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP). These communities embarked on an intensive planning process to identify the strategies, service and housing models, and local policies that will inform their overall approach to prevent and end youth homelessness. As part of the YHDP, communities have the flexibility to implement approaches that can be tailored to the unique needs and strengths of youth with both high- and low-service needs. As a cohort, these communities have collectively identified challenges and successes in their work to achieve the goal of preventing and ending youth homelessness. Common themes include:

1. **Youth are Experts.** Ensure youth and young adults with lived experiences of homelessness are treated as experts and involved in planning and decision-making. Young people should have as strong a role as adults in this work - sharing their voice, experience, and expertise as part of every meeting, every critical document review, every call. The real work in a community is creating the environment where this inclusion is authentic, where young people are empowered to use their influence and promote their ideas, and where older adults are aware of and address their own biases about what young people, including young people who have experienced homelessness, can contribute to the work. Key takeaways:

   - **Youth and young adults with lived experience should have seats on every youth-focused decision-making body in a CoC.** Youth should be leading partners in all aspects related to the coordinated community response to youth homelessness to ensure that it meets the needs of youth in the community.

   - **Older adults must undergo the difficult work of examining their own biases about what young people can contribute.** Many times, adults dismiss the opinions and expertise of young people because "they're just kids" and "don't have the maturity to contribute meaningfully." The first step towards authentic youth engagement is to recognize these attitudes, whether overt, systemic, or subtle, and to work towards valuing the input and participation of youth.

   - **When young people are working, pay them for their work.** Paying youth for their expertise and contribution demonstrates understanding of the value they bring to this work as experts.

   - **Identify the social and cultural barriers between young people and older adults**, such as appearance and language, by intentionally building trust and investing in the personal and professional development of youth experts. Ensure that youth experts have safe and stable housing.

   Resources:

   - [Youth Collaboration Toolkit](#) (True Colors Fund)
   - [Guide for Engaging Youth in Decision Making](#) (HUD)

2. **Use Data to Make Decisions.** Individual, project, and system data about the youth population should be used to identify needs and determine the types and scale of interventions a community needs to prevent and end youth homelessness. *The natural tendency is to come up with a good idea for a model and then to find data the supports the approach. This is not a best practice for planning a system.* A better approach is for communities to use the best available data that they have NOW to drive decisions, and not wait for 'perfect' data.

- **PIT Count and HMIS data provide a good foundation for understanding data about youth and young adults and their use of services (or lack thereof).** It's not perfect, but it provides communities with a good starting point upon which to build their system response and can help communities begin to understand some of the challenges and gaps in the current array of housing and services for youth.

- **Most communities struggle to obtain a complete picture of data related to youth under 18. Stop letting this paralyze your community into inaction.** For example, if your community cannot get complete school data now, explore innovative ways to sample and extrapolate in the short-term, while building towards a long-term strategy for obtaining a more robust dataset from schools. Implementing innovative data collection and using ideas like this accomplishes two goals—it gives communities some data to work from at the outset and it helps build trust and relationships across schools and CoCs to be able to do the much more difficult (and potentially time consuming) data sharing work later.

- **Use the data your community already has to ask questions about how your projects and system are performing now.** Your community can use both basic population data and system performance data specific to young adults to see where your system already succeeds and fails to end homelessness for youth, then begin to build your strategy from there. For example, has your community looked at the number of youth experiencing homelessness in your PIT next to the number of beds and units that they might be eligible for or use? If your community knows how long, on average, youth are experiencing homelessness, what does that indicate about the efficiency of your system? Does your community know its rate of return to homelessness for youth and young adults; if so, what does that indicate about the short- and long-term effectiveness of your system? External sources of data may also be readily available to you. For instance, the U.S. Department of Education has been making public school district homeless student demographic data available every year since June 2016 for school years from 2013-14 to 2016-17. The National Center for Homeless Education can provide these data for you by CoC so that you can look at trends over 3-4 years and provide other academic outcome data such as graduation and chronic absenteeism rates for high school students experiencing homelessness.

- **Using the data you have now, determine what it says about the kinds of interventions needed to prevent and end homelessness among youth and young adults.** For example, if your community has high numbers of young adults returning to homelessness within two years, infuse more permanent housing options specific to their needs and create robust diversion projects. Or if your community has a low percentage of successful exits to permanent housing, create more opportunities for young adults to access permanent housing in the ways that work for them.

- **Collect and use coordinated entry (CE) and prioritization tool data to make hypotheses about the highest impact-lowest cost intervention for each young person.** Also use this data to make hypotheses about the stratification of young people in your system across interventions. Then test your hypotheses. For example, if your assessment tool is showing many low and moderate acuity scores among youth, consider building in diversion and prevention projects for your lowest acuity youth and short-term rental assistance with supports for your moderate acuity youth; also scale the projects based on the numbers of youth in the low and moderate score ranges. The more your community engages in a critical assessment of existing data, the more likely it is that interventions can be adjusted to match the population needs. The more efficiently your community can move youth into the highest impact-lowest cost interventions, the more youth it can serve with the same amount of funding.

- **Conduct mini-assessments.** If your community cannot collect data/information from the whole universe of youth/young adults, consider collecting a small amount of information from samples of youth/young adults and see what can be learned from it. For example, your community could conduct a mini-assessment to learn about the population of youth who are "doubled-up" by asking youth providers questions about the safety and stability of different living situations. This could inform understanding of how to better triage between youth who are doubled-up. Or your community could conduct a mini-assessment with a small number of youth who are doubled-up and assessed through CE, learn about how these youth score in comparison to youth experiencing sheltered or unsheltered homelessness, and use the results to inform next steps for further engagement.

- **Use the data to make program design changes.** Set up data accountability sessions that are regular and frequent–look at the data as a group of interested community stakeholders and see how it changes over time. Adjust project designs based on your data and support practices that continue to improve overall system performance. Include youth and young adults in this process.

Resources:

- [Criteria and Benchmarks for Achieving the Goal of Ending Youth Homelessness](#) (USICH)

3. **Impactful partnerships are hard work**. HUD and its partners recognize that the homeless services system alone is insufficient to end youth homelessness. Communities must embrace cross-systems partnerships and meaningful collaboration as the foundation of building a coordinated community response to youth homelessness. But getting partners to commit to the work of preventing and ending youth homelessness takes more than just a good argument.

   - **Implement a reliable, transparent, and predictable decision-making structure.** Create a governance structure that receives input from all levels and all partners at all points throughout the process, from early planning to implementation to evaluation; builds task-groups that do the hard and time-consuming work of designing, arguing over, and agreeing to implementation strategies; and makes decisions about direction, timing, budget, and implementation.

   - **Build trust with intentional, regular, structured, and transparent communication.** This does not come naturally for most of us. We must work at it, and it is hard, especially when we have different interests than our partners and when we speak different social service languages. Learn to speak your partners' languages and use 'homeless services jargon' in plain language so that everyone can understand.

   - **Work to understand your partners' organizational self-interests and then agree to create a structure that helps them reach their goals too**. Pay attention to your partners' goals, whether it is permanency goals in child welfare, fewer detention placements in juvenile justice, graduation rates in schools, or others.   This will help create a system with buy-in from a cross-section of partners.

   - **Do not walk away when you get a "no" from a partner.** Regroup, strategize and try again. Keep showing up at your partner's meetings to show that you are a reliable and committed partner.

   - **Engage people at all levels of the partnership**. Engage and include leaders who can make decisions and changes in the organization, middle-management, and front-line workers who can implement change. Recommendations on unmet needs and opportunities should come from all levels of the organizations.

   Resources:

   - [Housing and Education Systems Collaboration](#) (HUD & ED)
   - [Mainstream System Collaboration](#) (HUD)
   - [Homelessness and Education Cross-Systems Collaboration: Applied Research Summary and Tools](#) (NCHE)

4. **Use subpopulation demographic data to influence interventions and implementation strategies.**

   - **Use data to look for system biases-** Plain and simple—if people of color or youth who identify as LGBTQ+ are overrepresented in the population of youth experiencing homelessness and underrepresented in the population of youth achieving safe and stable housing, there are biases in your current response to homelessness**.** Ask yourselves the hard questions to figure out where your work is breaking down from a structural perspective, not an individual bias perspective. Are there identifiable patterns to it? For example, are youth of color who have a high score being redirected away from some housing opportunities because of "challenging" (insert your community's word of choice here) neighborhoods, or landlords, or case management staff? Are you seeing lower levels of engagement among youth of color once they are selected for housing possibly indicating that the system is not responsive to these youth and young adults? Are income levels of youth of color lower than other youth and do they experience a more difficult time making rent payments? Are transgender youth getting connected to different job opportunities, or do they have trouble getting jobs compared to their peers? Once you see the patterns, do something to interrupt them. If it works, do more.

   - **Pay attention to the needs of both the parents and the children in pregnant and parenting youth households-** Pregnant and parenting youth sometimes fall in between the cracks of youth-focused and family-focused interventions. This is especially true for pregnant or parenting minors. Keep in mind that young parents might benefit from the types of projects offered to youth and young adults but may also benefit from the supports offered to families that also benefit their children. Be intentional about how your community designs case management for young people and their families. Housing options might not be different, but extra care in designing effective case management is crucial. Engage mainstream partners, such as public health nurses and early care and education providers (federal home visiting providers, Early Head Start/Head Start, CCDF subsidized child care, etc.) that specialize in working with young families and might be able to offer in-home supports.

   Resources:

   - [SPARC: Supporting Practices for Anti-Racist Communities](#) (C4)
   - [True Inclusion Toolbox](#) (True Colors Fund)

5. **Housing interventions and case management grounded in Housing First, Positive Youth Development (PYD), and Trauma Informed Care (TIC) approaches must be well-crafted and intentional**.

   - **It is not enough to say your approach to service delivery is grounded in PYD and TIC strategies.** Sometimes we give lip-service to these strategies but do not actually infuse the core elements of such approaches into the day-to-day practices of our work. This is hard work and should be treated as such.

- **Use approaches such as Housing First, PYD, and TIC, as a catalyst for culture change in your system and in organizations.** Successful implementation of these approaches often requires a culture shift, from leadership to front line staff. Be mindful of this shift and work across all levels of staff to ensure there is adequate buy-in. These approaches are critical to ending youth homelessness.

- **Be intentional in offering ongoing training and professional development to all levels of staff.** It takes work and ongoing training to engrain these approaches into the everyday work of an organization. Offer regular trainings and professional development opportunities to all levels of staff and find ways to engage youth in the trainings.

- **Assess the policy and procedures of your organization and individual projects to ensure they align with the approaches or models you are implementing.** Successful implementation means that your policies and procedures reflect the basic principles of these approaches. For example, an organization that has implemented positive youth development should have organizational policies that include youth in the development, implementation, and evaluation of projects or if individual projects advertise as housing first they need to have project policies that ensure low barriers to entry and youth choice in services and supports.

Resources:

- [Using a Housing First Philosophy when Serving Youth](#) (HUD)
- [Screening and Assessment Tools for Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs](#) (HHS)

Additional Resources:

- [Ending Youth Homelessness: A Guidebook Series](#) (HUD)
- [Rapid Re-housing for Youth Learning Community](#) (NAEH)
- [CE: Building Mutual Engagement Between Schools and Continuums of Care](#) (NCHE)
- [Youth Specific FAQs for Coordinated Entry](#) (HUD & HHS)
- [Coordinated Entry for Youth Brief](#) (HUD)