



A SAFE & DECENT PLACE TO LIVE

Towards A Housing First Framework for Youth

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homeless hub
REPORT SERIES

REPORT #12

A SAFE & DECENT PLACE TO LIVE

Towards a Housing First Framework for Youth



ISBN 978-1550146127
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How to cite this document:

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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ABOUT THIS REPORT

In recent years, policy-makers and service providers have expressed concerns about whether and how Housing First can be applied to the population of young people who experience homelessness. It is important to note that the development of this framework was the result of a collaboration between the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and two bodies that work with young people who are homeless: The Street Youth Planning Collaborative (Hamilton) and the National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness (details about these organizations are in the appendix of this report).

The collaborative process of producing this report involved not only drawing on the existing research evidence base, but on the expertise of leading thinkers on youth homelessness in Canada. Several workshops were held in Hamilton organized by the Street Youth Planning Collaborative (which included Executive Directors from a number of agencies, front line service providers and young people with lived experience of homelessness). Several youth participants were interviewed as part of this process. In addition, the National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness, which includes leading service providers and innovators in the area of youth homelessness from across the country, also conducted workshops and consultations to identify key issues and opportunities relating to Housing First. In addition to participating in consultations, members of both groups provided comment and feedback on earlier versions of the framework. The considerable expertise of these individuals and organizations has contributed to the development of an effective and achievable model of Housing First for youth.

Key Collaborators:



*THE NATIONAL LEARNING
COMMUNITY ON YOUTH
HOMELESSNESS*

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INTRODUCTION

Across North America and elsewhere in the world, Housing First is recognized as an effective and humane approach to addressing homelessness. The success of Housing First in providing stable housing and supports is now well established; in a sense, the debate about its effectiveness is now over. Considerable research in Canada, the United States and other countries attests to the effectiveness of this model in providing permanent housing and supports to individuals and families we might otherwise deem 'hard to house', including the chronically homeless and those with complex mental health and addictions challenges.

However, some questions do remain regarding the effectiveness and applicability for specific sub-populations, be they youth, Aboriginal persons, or those with addictions or mental health challenges.

In this report we set out to present a Framework for Housing First for Youth¹. 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. In the end, the question is not really, "Does Housing First work for youth?", because the research shows 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?"

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?"

Core Principles of Housing First for Youth

1. Immediate Access To Housing With No Preconditions
2. Youth Choice And Self-Determination.
3. Positive Youth Development Orientation.
4. Individualized And Client-Driven Supports.
5. Social And Community Integration.

¹ Sections of this document have been reproduced with permission, from Gaetz, Stephen (2013) and Gaetz, Stephen (2014).

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 based on the belief that Housing First can be conceptualized as one of a range of possible solutions to youth homelessness. This does mean modifying the core principles and approach somewhat, reflecting our understanding that the experience of homelessness is different for young people compared to adults and as such, the nature of supports must also be distinct. 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 Framework for Housing First builds on what we know about Housing First and about working with young people who are homeless. Here, we outline core principles of Housing First.

We also identify a range of models of accommodation and support for young people. This includes not only scattered site housing where young people control the lease, but also some forms of transitional housing, permanent supportive housing and for some young people, moving back home to live with caregivers. The range of supports we identify for young people are more extensive than what is typically envisioned for Housing First. This, again, is because the goal is to link supports to housing options in ways that make sense for developing adolescents and young adults.

In an attempt to develop something that meets the needs of young people, the framework developed here in some ways significantly deviates from what we have come to think of as Housing First. It must be acknowledged that there are risks in broadening a concept. The development of this framework should not, and cannot, mean that providers simply rename what they are currently doing as Housing First, either because of the popularity of the concept, or because of pressure from funders. For instance, not all transitional housing models – indeed, not all independent living programs - fit this framework and as such should not be called Housing First. For a program or philosophy to be legitimately referred to Housing First, it will be necessary for providers to assure there is fidelity to the core principles, description of housing options, and accompanying services and supports, as outlined in this document.

Prior to implementation, it will also be necessary to ensure that appropriate housing options and supports are in place.

WHAT IS HOUSING FIRST?

Housing First is an important intervention for people who experience homelessness – and in particular, chronically homeless adults with complex mental health and addiction challenges. It represents *one kind* of intervention for people experiencing homelessness and is seen to be complementary to other approaches that include prevention, short-term emergency services and other models of housing and support.

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)

The focus of Housing First, then, is not to simply put homeless people into housing. Rather, it is to provide people with housing and supports as determined by the client, in order to help people who experience homelessness recover and achieve independence. The evidence for the effectiveness of Housing First with adult populations (and in particular, the chronically homeless) is both extensive and compelling. There is a substantial body of research that convincingly demonstrates Housing First’s general effectiveness, when compared to ‘treatment first’ approaches, including research from Canada (City of Toronto, 2007; Culhane et al., 2002; Falvo, 2009; 2010; Mares & Rosenheck, 2007; 2010; Metraux et al., 2003; O’Connell et al., 2008; Pearson et al., 2007; Rosenheck et al., 2003; Shern et al., 1997; Tsemberis & Eisenberg, 2000; Tsemberis et al., 2004; Goering et al. 2012; 2014; Gaetz, 2013; Waegemakers Schiff & Rook, 2012). In fact, it is one of the few homelessness interventions that can definitely be considered to be a “best practice.”

The body of research emanating from the *At Home/Chez Soi* project provides the best evidence base for this intervention². The *At Home/Chez Soi* Toronto research team conducted a review of the literature and found the following evidence of the model's effectiveness:

- **Housing First has a positive impact on housing stability.**
- **Housing First reduces unnecessary emergency visits and hospitalizations.**
- **Housing First can lead to improved health and mental health outcomes and the stabilization or reduction of addictions.**
- **Housing First reduces client involvement with police and the criminal justice system.**
- **Housing First improves quality of life.**

The research on Housing First suggests that not only is it an effective intervention with a strong evidence base (a best practice), but it is also likely more cost effective than 'treatment as usual' (Larimer, 2009; Goering et al., 2012; 2014; Gaetz, 2012). Housing First is not the only possible response to homelessness, but it is a key one. Preventing homelessness – stopping people from becoming homeless in the first place -- should be the central thrust of any response to homelessness. Emergency services and supports will always be needed, because in spite of the best efforts to prevent homelessness, crises will happen that mean people will lose their housing. Emergency services should not become permanent solutions for those who fall on hard times, however. Amongst models of accommodation and supports for moving people out of homelessness, Housing First is a clearly successful intervention and a humane response for which there is a strong evidence base.

Figure 1
Housing First in context



Housing First is not the only possible response to homelessness, but it is a key one.

² An extensive list of research reports from the *At Home/Chez Soi* project can be found on the Mental Health Commission of Canada's website: <http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/issues/housing?routetoken=a0e29a03d828cfe8c99d30b-93dae9fdc&terminal=23>

3

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.

Here, it is argued that 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. Young people, depending on their age, may be going through significant developmental changes (physical, cognitive, emotional and social) that impact on decision-making, relationships and organization. They may also have very little or no experience of living independently, dealing with landlords or managing a household budget. Finally, youth may experience various forms of exclusion that mean they cannot easily access rental accommodation or a living wage, both of which are necessary for independent living.

When we say “young people who are homeless”, we are referring to those:

“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. 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.” (Gaetz, 2014:13).

In thinking about how to respond to youth homelessness it is also important to consider the diversity of the population. That is, young people who are male may need different kinds of supports than those who are female. Additionally some young people are doubly and triply marginalized because of racism and/or homophobia. Many young people are parents and have more complicated family relationships because of it. Finally, age differences matter. Developing adolescents and young adults are going through many significant physical, cognitive and social changes. As such, there is a huge difference in the needs, circumstances and physical and emotional development of a 14 year old compared to an 18 year old or a 23 year old³. Young people of different ages may also have distinct legal statuses in terms of access to programs and services, criminal justice, privacy, etc.

³ It must 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.

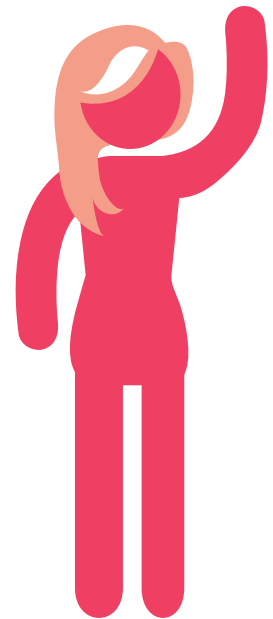
All of this suggests that service provision must necessarily take account of and respond to the different needs of young people based on age, gender, sexual orientation, family structure and experience of marginalization.

With regards to Housing First then, we need to ask: What kind of housing do young people need? What supports? Does a model of accommodation and supports designed for adults easily work for youth? First and foremost, a youth-focused approach to Housing First must go beyond assisting young people merely to become independent, but rather, to enable them to make a successful transition to adulthood (Gaetz, 2014; Gaetz & Scott, 2012:5). In Canada, it is a widely held value that we should work to ensure all young people have the supports and opportunities (including education) necessary to help them lead lives as happy, productive and socially engaged adults. Particularly for those teens in the throws of adolescence, they need to be allowed the time to grow into and assume the full responsibilities of adulthood. This most certainly should be the focus of any strategy for homeless youth, including Housing First.

Following from this, the framework for youth being proposed here broadens the mandate for Housing First. It is argued here that Housing First should be an approach and philosophy that prioritizes not only young people with high levels of acuity (mental health and addictions) but all young people who experience homelessness.

And 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, the greater likelihood of their experiencing crime and violence as well as sexual and economic exploitation.

FIRST AND FOREMOST, A YOUTH-FOCUSED APPROACH TO HOUSING FIRST MUST GO BEYOND ASSISTING YOUNG PEOPLE MERELY TO BECOME INDEPENDENT, BUT RATHER, TO ENABLE THEM TO MAKE A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD.



Concerns About The Applicability Of Housing First For Youth

As Housing First becomes more popular and there are increasing expectations (including from funders) that communities adopt this intervention, concerns about its applicability often surface. In some cases these concerns stem from a lack of understanding about what Housing First is and how it is applied⁴. In other cases, the concerns have more to do about how to make sense of it in terms of the needs of the developing adolescent and young adult.

In order to work towards an appropriate Housing First framework for youth, several workshops involving service providers (and in some cases including youth) were conducted in Hamilton with the Street Youth Planning Collaborative and by the national Learning Community supported by Eva's Initiatives. In both cases, participants stressed that a Housing First approach for youth must not merely replicate the model for adults and must appropriately meet the developmental needs and capacities of adolescents and young adults. Key points and questions raised related to:

- **Age and maturity** – For many young people (particularly those 18 and under) the burden of running one's own household may be overwhelming.
- **Potential isolation** – Some young people fear the disconnection that may result if they were settled into scattered site housing without having strong social and community supports.
- **Legal issues** – Getting access to insured housing is a challenge in some jurisdictions. In addition, age-mandated differences in terms of supports (mental health, child protection, eligibility for income support, etc.) can complicate implementation of support models.
- **Length of supports** – Because of issues relating to the nature of adolescent development and the time it takes to mature into an independent adult, young people may need basic supports for longer periods of time than structured Housing First programs allow.
- **Youth appropriate supports** – The range, underlying philosophy and service delivery model must necessarily be youth appropriate and based on the needs of adolescents and emerging adults. It is also recognized that in accessing housing, for instance, young people may experience age discrimination.
- **Trust building** – Because many young people have difficulty forming attachments due to trauma experienced in their childhood and youth, it takes time to establish the meaningful relationships necessary to help young people access the supports they need.
- **Housing First is one of many key interventions** – Responses to youth homelessness must also include preventive strategies, early intervention options (including family reconnection and host homes) and a range of accommodation and support options.

A focus group with young people hosted by Hamilton's Street Youth Planning Collaborative highlighted perspectives of youth who have experienced homelessness. This group emphasized the need for individualized, comprehensive, age appropriate supports to accompany any accommodation that they received. Some young people identified concerns about isolation and their desire to live in congregate environments, at least at the beginning. Many youth "spoke of the sense of isolation and being overwhelmed that would result from a Housing First program that didn't include regular outreach supports, noting that youth often lack the experience and maturity to 'instantly go it alone'" (SYPC, 2013).

⁴ Some popular misconceptions include the belief that Housing First:

- involves simply putting people into housing, often in remote areas, with no supports or assistance.
- Is an American intervention that won't work in Canada.
- only provides people with the option of scattered site, private sector housing.

Are There Good Examples Of Housing First For Youth?

In spite of these promising examples, the research to support the efficacy of the approach with a youth-based population is not strongly established as of yet⁵. So what do we know at this point? There are a number of examples of communities in Canada where Housing First is being applied with youth populations, including Toronto, Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton and St. John's, Nfld. In Vancouver, **Directions Youth Services Centre** has a Housing First approach for homeless youth aged 19-24, in which young people in the program receive support over a two-year period to find, acquire and maintain housing.

The best evidence we have to date in support of Housing First for youth comes from the **Infinity Project** in Calgary, operated by **Boys and Girls Club of Calgary** (for fuller details, see Scott & Harrison, 2013; Davies, 2013). Serving young people 16-24 years of age, the goal of Infinity is to help youth become permanently housed and to increase and maintain self-sufficiency and a successful transition to adulthood. In addition to accessing housing (and obtaining rent supplements), young people are provided with a range of social supports include facilitating reconnection with family and natural supports where safe and appropriate, are provided with referrals and assistance in accessing services and supports, in re-engaging with education and training and setting career goals and career goals. In terms of youth engagement, young people are supported in volunteering, exploring community resources and opportunities in their community, attending community events, identifying interests and exploring opportunities for them to become involved in programming. A central tenet of the Infinity Project is "zero discharge into homelessness", meaning 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.

An evaluation of the project shows quite successful outcomes after the first year, including a housing retention rate of 95% and increases in income stability and access to services (Scott & Harrison, 2013).

A CENTRAL TENET OF THE INFINITY PROJECT IS "ZERO DISCHARGE INTO HOMELESSNESS", MEANING 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.

⁵ It should be noted that the *At Home/Chez Soi* project did include a number of participants under the age of 25 and there is an intent to report research findings relating to Housing First with this sub-population. However, these findings were not released at the time this report was published.

Another perspective is provided by the *Youth Matters in London* project, which argues 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).***

The research evidence regarding Housing First for youth suggests several things, then. First, as it is currently constituted, Housing First is clearly a viable, effective and preferred option for some youth, but not all. Second, the two research perspectives are not contradictory and do not undermine the efficacy of Housing First for youth, when we remember that client choice is a key underlying principle. Finally, and following from this, young people may need a range of housing options within the Housing First umbrella, that go beyond the scattered site model that is fundamental to many Housing First approaches. 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, et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, based on the existing research evidence, what we have heard from young people and service providers and what we know about the needs of homeless youth (Gaetz, Scott & Gulliver, 2013; Gaetz, 2014), it is possible to consider an effective and age-appropriate Housing First Framework for Youth

THE CORE PRINCIPLES

The Core Principles of Housing First for Youth

In the Canadian context, the philosophy and program model of Housing First must be guided by core principles and these are documented in the “Framework for Housing First” (Gaetz, 2013). These include: 1. Immediate access to permanent housing with no housing readiness requirements; 2. Consumer choice and self-determination; 3. Recovery orientation to services; 4. Individualized and client-driven supports and 5. Social and community integration. While all Housing First programs ideally share these critical elements, there is considerable variation in how the model is applied, based on the local community context, resource availability and the kinds of supports that are available. There is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to Housing First.

As part of our youth framework, the core principles of Housing First have been adapted to reflect the needs of the developing adolescent and young adult.

The Core Principles of Housing First for Youth include:

1. Immediate access to housing with no preconditions.

Housing First involves providing young people with assistance in finding and obtaining safe, secure and permanent housing that meets their needs as quickly as possible. 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. Program participation is also voluntary. This approach runs in contrast to what has been the orthodoxy of ‘treatment first’ approaches whereby people experiencing homelessness are placed in emergency services and must address certain personal issues (addictions, mental health) prior to being deemed ‘ready’ for housing (having received access to health care or treatment).

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.

Core Principles of Housing First for Youth

1. Immediate Access To Housing With No Preconditions
2. Youth Choice And Self-Determination.
3. Positive Youth Development Orientation.
4. Individualized And Client-Driven Supports.
5. Social And Community Integration

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.). Choice may be constrained by local availability and affordability. This may mean that some young people want independent scattered site housing, but others may feel that congregate transitional housing models better suit their needs.
- **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** — One of the consequences of such experiences is higher levels of substance use and addiction. For young people with addictions challenges, a recovery orientation also means access to a harm reduction environment. 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. However, as part of the spectrum of choices that underlies both Housing First and harm reduction, people may desire and choose ‘abstinence only’ housing. A core philosophy of virtually all approaches to Housing First is that there should be no requirement of sobriety or abstinence. A core philosophy of virtually all approaches to Housing First is that there should be no requirement of sobriety or abstinence.



The importance of harm reduction: A core philosophy of virtually all approaches to Housing First is that there should be no requirement of sobriety or abstinence to participate in the program.

3. Positive youth development orientation.

Within the established Housing First model, practice is not simply focused on meeting basic client needs, but on supporting recovery. This is central to the Pathways model⁶ and At Home/ Chez Soi. A recovery orientation focuses on individual well-being and ensures that clients have access to a range of supports that enable them to nurture and maintain social, recreational, educational, occupational and vocational activities.

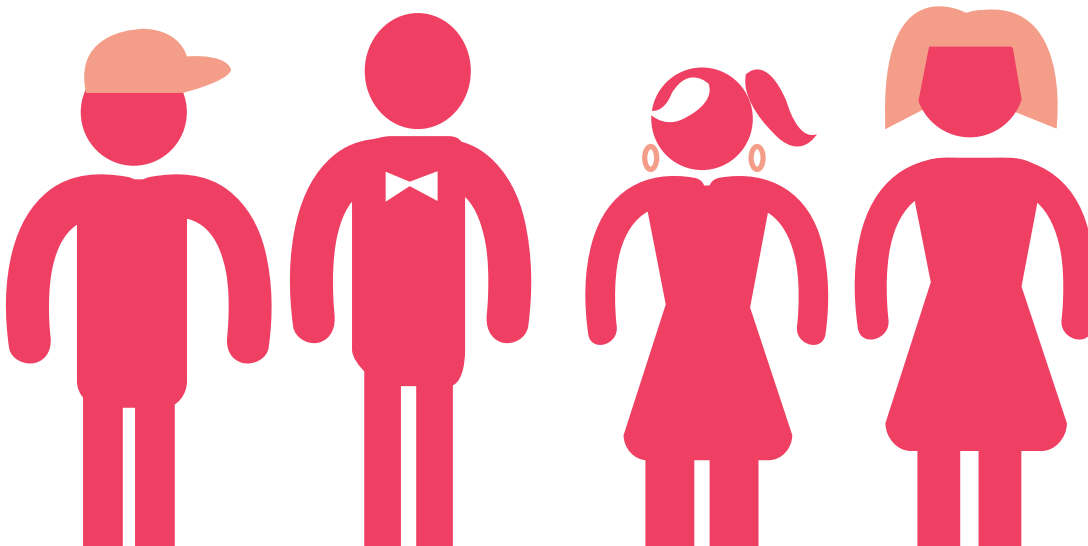
For young people, the recovery orientation must be solidly framed in terms of a positive youth development orientation. That is, rather than merely focusing on risk and deficits, models of support must emphasize an assets-based approach that incorporates an understanding of the physical, cognitive, emotional and social needs of the developing adolescent. It must build on the strengths, talents and dreams of young people, and work towards enhancing protective factors and resilience.

The focus of Housing First for youth, then, 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. A recovery orientation embedded

⁶ Pathways to Housing, a Housing First program in New York directed by Sam Tsemberis, is considered a pioneer in Housing First research and practice (Tsemberis, et al., 2000; 2004).

in an understanding of child and youth development must also be based on a recognition that many young people who wind up homelessness have experienced trauma in the past. Research consistently shows that a 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. (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Karabanow, 2004; 2008; Rew et al., 2001; Tyler & Bersani, 2008; Van den Bree et al., 2009). Moreover, once on the streets, young people are often exposed to high levels of violence (Gaetz et al., 2010) and sexual exploitation. Such traumatic experiences can impair cognitive development, decision-making and undermine the ability of young people to form attachments.

RATHER THAN MERELY FOCUSING ON RISK AND DEFICITS, A POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT APPROACH IS ASSET BASED AND INCORPORATES AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE PHYSICAL, COGNITIVE, EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL NEEDS OF THE DEVELOPING ADOLESCENT. IT MUST BUILD ON THE STRENGTHS, TALENTS AND DREAMS OF YOUNG PEOPLE AND WORK TOWARDS ENHANCING PROTECTIVE FACTORS AND RESILIENCE.



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). Individuals should be provided with “a range of treatment and support services that are voluntary, individualized, culturally-appropriate and portable (e.g. in mental health, substance use, physical health, employment, education)” (Goering et al., 2012:12). Supports may address housing stability, health and mental health needs and life skills.

It is important to remember that a central philosophy of Housing First is that people have access to the supports they need, if they choose. Access to housing is not conditional upon accepting a particular kind of service. At the same time, a youth-focused approach to Housing First must be:

- Flexible in terms of time frames. Providing supports for one, two or even three years is unlikely to be adequate for young people, especially those under 18 and/or those who have experienced trauma or who have more complicated developmental, mental health and disability challenges.
- Adaptable based on the evolving needs of a young person. Individualized plans of care will need to take account of developmental changes, capabilities and capacities, maturity and level of independence.

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. If people are housed and become or remain socially isolated, the stability of their housing may be compromised. Key features of social and community integration include:

- Housing models that do not stigmatize or isolate clients. The kinds of housing a young person needs may evolve over time. Those who work with homeless youth regularly remark that for young people – particularly younger teens – loneliness and isolation are constant concerns that can have an impact on reintegration.
- Opportunities for social and cultural engagement in order to develop positive social relationships and enhance social inclusion.
- Support for family reconnection, driven by the needs and desires of the young person. Though many young people leave home because of family conflict, family and community supports will continue to be important to most youth, even those who become homeless (Winland, 2013).
- Opportunities for engagement in meaningful activities through employment, vocational and recreational activities.

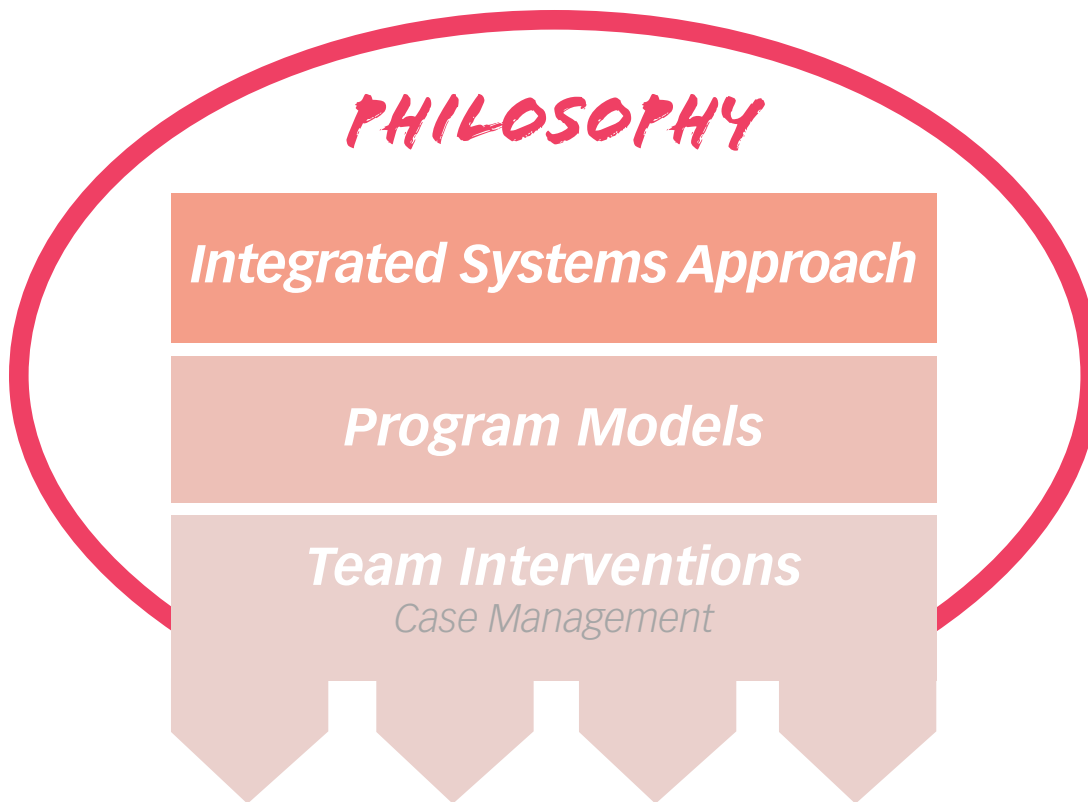


APPLICATION

The Application of Housing First for youth

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 2: Application of Housing First



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. As a philosophy, it can underlie the work that an agency does or that of a whole community. It can inform how outreach is conducted or the mandate of an emergency shelter.


Systems Approach

Housing First for youth should properly be embedded within a systems approach when the foundational philosophy and core principles of Housing First are applied across and infused throughout integrated systems models of service delivery. 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. While the service providers in the system are not Housing First programs on their own, they form different parts of a larger system that works towards achieving the goals of a Housing First program.


An integrated systems approach must also address mainstream systems and services that may contribute to youth homelessness, such as education, corrections and child welfare systems. As it is known that a disproportionate number of homeless youth were once in the care of child protection services (Nichols, 2013; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Gaetz, 2014; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006; Serge et al., 2002), it is imperative that those services work with youth homelessness service providers to ensure a smooth and sustainable transition to housing with appropriate supports. Young people should never be discharged into homelessness, whether they leave care of their own volition, or ‘age out’ of the 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. As it grows in popularity it is applied in new ways and in different contexts, resulting in a broad range of program models. The Infinity Project operated by the Boys and Girls Club of Calgary is one such example (Scott & Harrison, 2013).



All young people deserve housing and people who are homeless will do better and recover more effectively if they are first provided with housing.



Case Management

Finally, one needs to consider how case management is delivered to support Housing First. For Pathways models of Housing First – that is, models targeting chronically homeless adults with more complex, severe and persistent health, mental health and addictions challenges – team-based approaches are applied. This includes **Assertive Community Treatment (ACT)** teams. In the ACT model, a multidisciplinary team in the community where the individual lives, rather than in an office-based practice or an institution, provides case management. The team involves psychiatrists, family physicians, social workers, nurses, occupational therapists, vocational specialists, peer support workers, etc. and is available to the patient/client 24 hour a day, 7 days a week.

Supports may also be provide through **Intensive Case Management**, which is also a team-based approach designed for clients with lower acuity, but who are identified as needing intensive support for a shorter and time-delineated period. The *At Home/Chez Soi* project has identified that for many clients, the first three months can be most challenging and providing appropriate levels of support may be crucial for recovery and retention of housing.

Not all young people will need the same kinds of supports as chronically homeless adults with high acuity mental health and addictions problems. Young people have complex needs, but these may be profoundly different than those associated with adult homeless populations. 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.

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 (Milaney, 2011; 2012). Young people should expect to be contacted/visited at least once a week, based on desire or need. Few, if any, young people will absolutely refuse supports. Kim Wirth of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary says, “I don’t recall it ever being an issue. Our kids are kinda down with it” (personal communication). Case work can be very involved, depending on the client. For some it will be a weekly check-in. For others it may mean ongoing communication, face-to-face, over the phone or through social media. The recommended case load for case managers for youth should be no more than ten, ideally around seven.

Case management is as important as the housing itself and must be age appropriate (that is, the needs of a 16 year old are generally different from those of a 23 year old), focused on the needs of the developing adolescent or young adult, be flexible and built around the needs of the specific individual. It should not be a requirement that the young person meet the needs of the program; rather, the program should be fitted to the needs of the young individual.

Intake and 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 and 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.

Assessment and case management tools for Housing First for youth need to be designed with reference to the conditions, needs and circumstances of young people. Acuity assessment tools developed for chronically homeless adults may not effectively identify service and support needs for young people. There are different case management tools available that enable the assessment of acuity, needs and strengths assessment and assist with planning. One popular tool is the **Outcomes Star** (MacKeith et al., 2006). Another one that is used in some communities in Canada (such as Hamilton by the Street Youth Planning Collaborative) is called the **Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS)**⁷. 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.

Family Reconnection

A key intervention for young people that should be integrated into the Housing First framework is family reconnection⁸. The underlying ethos of family reconnection 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. Family reconnect programs offer individual and family support to young people who have become – or who are at risk of becoming – homeless. Through assessment, counselling and access to appropriate services and supports, young people and their families can potentially improve relationships, strengthen life skills and engage in meaningful activities. Family reconnection is important within the framework of Housing First because a key housing option for young people may be to move back home. For those who cannot, their move into the community can potentially be *supported* by family.

The underlying ethos of family reconnection 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.

⁷ CANS 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/>

⁸ The family reconnect approach is discussed more extensively in the report, Family Matters (Winland, et al., 2011; Winland, 2013).

ACCOMMODATION

Models of Accommodation

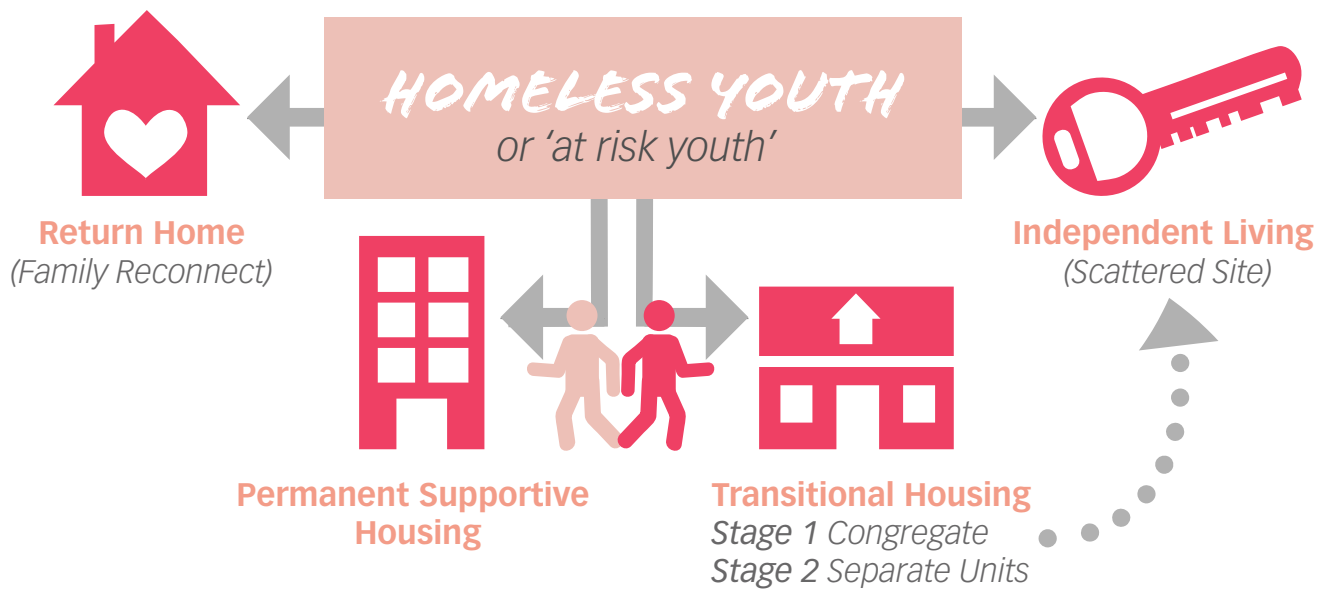
A key principle of Housing First is **Consumer Choice and Self-Determination**. In other words, people should have some kind of choice as to what kind of housing they receive and where it is located. There are sometimes questions about the kind of housing that people should have access to through Housing First. The Pathways model prioritizes the use of **scattered-site housing** which involves renting units in independent private rental markets. In other cases people may prefer **congregate models of housing**, where there are many units in a single building is seen as optimal although the effectiveness of this model has not yet been proven.

“In terms of Housing First for youth I think that’s a fantastic idea because it gives young people options. Some people are more independent than others, some have different issues and things like that. It’s a really great idea because it will give people a chance – a fighting chance. The way I would imagine it is like if there is some young person who is at risk of being homeless, they would have an interview with someone who would assess their needs, their strengths and weaknesses and build their plan of care around that; that would be a fantastic idea. Because someone goes into a shelter, they change within 24 hours they become a completely different person.”

— *Conor, age 20, Hamilton, ON.*

The question then becomes what kinds of accommodation and supports should be accessed and enabled through a Housing First program. The diagram below outlines a new model of accommodations for youth, that includes scattered site independent living whereby the young person holds the lease, permanent supportive housing for those with high needs (mental health, addictions, disabilities) and transitional housing.

Figure 3: 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, god-parents, 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

One of the consequences of the success of Housing First – and in particular, the Pathways model – is that transitional housing has become somewhat controversial and is rejected by many as an outmoded homelessness intervention. 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).*

Transitional housing has been seen by some as suspect, then, because of the underlying assumption that individuals must be made ‘ready’ for permanent housing and that supports are necessarily time delimited (the latter criticism can also be leveled at some approaches to Housing First). There is actually very little evaluative research that attests to the effectiveness of transitional housing for youth, or in fact to its inadequacy (Eberle et al. 2007; Millar, 2009; 2010; USICH, 2013).

The question of whether transitional housing is appropriate for youth and can be incorporated within a Housing First framework is worth exploring. One of the challenges in assessing effectiveness is because the term itself describes an incredibly broad range of program models and practices. Transitional housing can be defined as an interim model of housing that provides a supportive environment for young people and is intended to enable the successful transition to adulthood and independence. Key features of transitional housing models for youth should include:

- Flexible time limits – young people should be able to stay as long as they need.
- Youth appropriate services and supports (see below).
- Focus on education.
- Employment opportunities, training and income supports
- Client-centred case management.
- Positive youth development focus.

The actual living arrangements within a transitional housing model can vary. Two stage models provide an interesting approach, whereby in the first stage, young people live in congregate settings where they may share living space (separate bedrooms but congregate cooking and living spaces). In the second stage, young people may move into separate bachelor apartments within the same facility. This allows for more independence and the learning of life skills, but in a more structured environment than scattered site models.

“Back then I might have thought it was a great idea, like ‘fantastic, yay, I get my own place’ but since then I’ve been through it all now I can see that I wouldn’t have been able to be what I am today if I was like ‘Here you go, you’ve got your own place’. [In transitional housing] I learned how to budget money and figure myself out and got help with my own mental health and drug addictions. If I was just given a place, it might have been just like couch surfing in my own place, do my own drugs there. Now I don’t do drugs and I can cook for myself – not that I couldn’t before, but I can cook a lot better, and I know a lot about nutrition.”

— Alex, age 19, Hamilton, ON.

So why even bother with transitional housing? Why not straight to the scattered site housing that one traditionally associates with housing first? There are several key reasons. Some youth – particularly very young teens – 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. As Karabanow & Naylor suggest, “Cutting ties often uncovered feelings of confusion, guilt, abandonment, disloyalty, resentment and loneliness” (Karabanow & Naylor, 2013: 39). Similar concerns to this were voiced by the youth advisory committee of Hamilton’s Street Youth Planning Collaborative.

The inclusion of transitional housing as a form of accommodation thus makes sense within a Housing First framework for youth, particularly those under the age of 18, because:

- Some youth will choose transitional housing – including congregate models – prior to living independently. A key principle of Housing First is client choice.
- Legal barriers and discrimination may make obtaining and maintaining housing problematic for those under 18. In some jurisdictions, young people under 18 cannot obtain a lease.
- While independent living is an eventual goal, some young people may prefer to address other issues first (Forchuk et al., 2013).
- The rush to independent living may lead some young people to pursue employment (to pay the rent) rather than education.
- There is strong evidence for the effectiveness of transitional models for youth such as the Foyer (Gaetz & Scott, 2012).
- Transitional housing that offers opportunities for ‘lease conversion’ can provide a bridge to independent living.

One model of transitional housing for youth for which there is an extensive body of evaluative research is the Foyer (Gaetz & Scott, 2012). There are a broad range of examples in the United Kingdom and Australia, that utilize different models of accommodation including fixed site congregate living, scattered site housing and the “Hub and Spoke” model which combines the two and is designed to give young people a range of options (Beer et al., 2005; Bond, 2010; Gaetz & Scott, 2012; Quilgars et al., 2008; Quilgars & Anderson, 1995; Smith et al., 2006). Foyers provide a broad range of supports for young people just as Housing First does, but with a youth-centric focus. The models are not so far apart after all and therefore it is worth considering how the two can be included within a Housing First framework for youth.

“Transitional housing is really a great option for a lot of people because of the fact that it gives you an experience of what it is like to live on your own, however it still has supports there put in place to fall back on just in case you need help with some sort of thing. A lot of the staff at the transitional house really saw a lot of the things I hadn’t really even considered and geared something towards helping me to develop those skills. That’s one of the things I really liked once I started living there, was that they developed a plan geared towards the individual person.”

— Conor, age 20, Hamilton, ON

One final point: the inclusion of transitional housing within this framework comes with a caveat. That is, 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. It can also be achieved through 'lease conversion', whereby after a time, young people who are living in apartments have the leases transferred over to them. In this way, they can achieve independence without having to move.

In such cases, young people should also be provided with the option of aftercare support. Moving to independence should not be seen as 'punishment' whereby services are completely withdrawn. The notion of aftercare also is done in recognition that many housed young people move back and forth between independent living and home.

Transitional housing that does not lay out, and support, a clear pathway to independent living is not part of a Housing First model. Again, an underlying principle of Housing First for youth is zero discharge into homelessness.

Independent Living

This is the model of accommodation that most closely fits with mainstream approaches to Housing First. Independent living 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.

Moving into independent accommodation can present opportunities and challenges for young people. Karabanow has suggested that in order to 'leave the streets', spatial separation of housing from both street youth services and from those spaces that street youth occupy may be important. At the same time, as he also suggests, this transition may be accompanied by feelings of loss, guilt, loneliness and isolation. Learning how to manage having friends over in ways that do not jeopardize their tenancy can be a challenge for young people who are used to the companionship of friends.

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

Supports

Housing First is about much more than simply housing. There is often the very mistaken perception that Housing First simply involves putting people in housing and leaving them be. In fact, central to Housing First is the idea that people should be offered supports based on their need, but also on their consent to participate. The Housing First model as constituted for adults typically involves three kinds of supports⁹: 1. Housing supports, 2. Clinical supports and 3. Complementary supports.

In the framework to follow, these will be expanded in order to address the needs of the developing adolescent and young adult.

As stated in the recent report *Coming of Age* (Gaetz, 2014), 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.” (Gaetz, 2014:78)

A Housing First strategy for youth must ensure that 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. As emphasized in the core principles of Housing First outlined here, services and supports should be designed and delivered from a ‘positive youth development’ perspective. The focus should be on building on strengths and assets of young people. Supports should also be oriented towards enhancing protective factors and resilience.

Determining what kinds of supports a young person needs, and matching those needs to supports, is a key feature of effective case management. An effective assessment will determine what these needs are. Ongoing case management and aftercare (supports after the young person has left the program) will ensure that supports match the evolving needs of the individual.

⁹ These are adapted from the *At Home/Chez Soi* project.

Housing First Supports for Youth

1. Housing Supports
2. Supports for Health and Well-being
3. Supporting Access to Income and Education
4. Complementary Supports
5. Opportunities for Meaningful Engagement

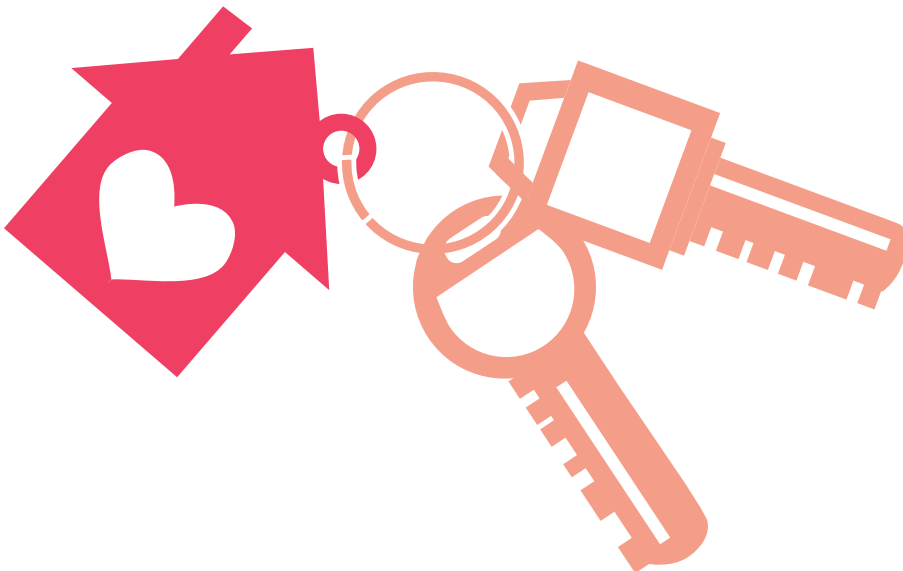
So when considering housing options for young people, one must consider the extent and kinds of supports a young person needs in addition to providing access to **stable housing**. There is a spectrum of social and health needs for which young people may require supports and depending on their age, level 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:

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.

Help in Obtaining Housing

Young people should receive support in searching for, and obtaining, housing that is safe, affordable and appropriate. In very tight housing markets this may be a significant challenge for anyone, but especially for a young person with lack of experience who may also be subject to age discrimination. When suitable housing is available, young people will need support in negotiating with landlords, signing a lease and understanding tenant rights and responsibilities. This is significant because young people with lack of experience may be vulnerable to unscrupulous landlords.



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. In other words, there is a strong social dimension to obtaining and maintaining housing. Young people will need support and coaching in maintaining solid relationships with landlords (including conflict mediation and crisis resolution). They will also need to learn how to deal with neighbours and importantly, how to conduct relationships with friends in ways that do not jeopardize their housing (for instance learning to not invite large numbers of friends to live with them).

Rent Supplements

Given the low earning power of many youth, and the fact that ideally they will be supported in returning to school, providers should ensure that young people have access to income supports. As a reflection of their impoverished status, many young people lack the funds or income required to obtain and maintain housing (some jurisdictions require first and last month's rent). In addition, they may also require financial supports to obtain furniture and purchase supplies, etc. 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

Lack of experience combined with limited supports puts young people in the position of being vulnerable to losing their housing. If we also acknowledge that part of growing up is making mistakes and learning to deal with them, a Housing First model for youth must be flexible in dealing with situations where young people are about to, or may in fact, lose their housing. Evictions should not be treated as failure or as a reason to sanction a young person; rather they should receive support to obtain new accommodations and be encouraged to learn from their previous experience.

In other words, 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, there may still be unanticipated problems. Young people may lose their job, relationships may falter, they may decide to go to school or a range of other challenges may occur. For young people who moved out from their parental home, there is usually the option of moving back home. This is not likely the case for most young people who experience homelessness. As such, some degree of aftercare is advisable, as is the possibility of moving back to a more supportive housing environment if necessary. Aftercare can take the form of occasional check-ins, plus ensuring that the young person understands their options. This is all part of ensuring longer-term housing stability, and reducing the risk of a return to homelessness.

2. Supports for Health and Well-being

These are supports designed to enhance the health, mental health and social care of the client. Housing 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

Young people who become homeless often have experienced trauma during their childhood, in the form of family violence, sexual abuse, etc. (Ballon et al., 2001; Gaetz et al., 2002; Karabanow, 2004; Rew et al., 2001; Thrane et al., 2006; Tyler & Bersani, 2008; Tyler et al., 2000; Whitbeck & Hoyt 1999; Van den Bree et al., 2009). Moreover, the occurrence of homelessness itself – from the loss of family, friends and community to the experience of street violence and exploitation – are also considered to be traumatic events. Trauma can be overwhelming, leading to addictions, sexual risk taking and the inability to move forward with one's life.

As such, it is essential that those providing Housing First supports practice trauma-informed care. This means an organizational structure and treatment framework that places a priority on awareness, understanding and responding to trauma and ensuring the survivor's physical and emotional safety. It also means a client-driven approach where young people are encouraged and supported to exercise choice and control in all decisions regarding housing and supports. An organizational philosophy that supports trauma-informed care, a strong policy framework and ongoing training of all staff is recommended to support this necessary approach (Hopper, et al., 2010).

**TRAUMA CAN BE
OVERWHELMING,
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THE INABILITY TO
MOVE FORWARD
WITH ONE'S LIFE.**



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 (McCay, 2009; McCay & Aiello, 2013; Kidd, 2004; 2013; Boivin, 2005; Kidd & Kral, 2002). 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.

Substance Use and 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.

Harm Reduction

Housing First programs should necessarily incorporate a ‘harm reduction’ philosophy and approach that are best suited to young people. This means there can be no ‘abstinence only’ requirements to access housing and that young people with addictions issues should be supported in a way that reduces harms to themselves and others. 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.

Healthy Sexuality

Sexual health is a central feature of physical, emotional and social health and well-being that influences individuals of all ages. Unfortunately, many young people have been exposed to physical and sexual abuse at a young age. Further, young people who remain homeless for extended periods of time are also exposed to early sexual activity, exploitation (including pressure to exchange sex for food, shelter, money or companionship) and a greater risk of sexual assault (Milburn et al., 2009; Saewyc et al., 2013; Gaetz, 2004; Gaetz et al., 2010). Finally, youth who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, two-spirited or queer, may face additional challenges in their transition to adulthood. It is important that services are sensitive to the diverse sexuality of youth including gender-appropriate services.

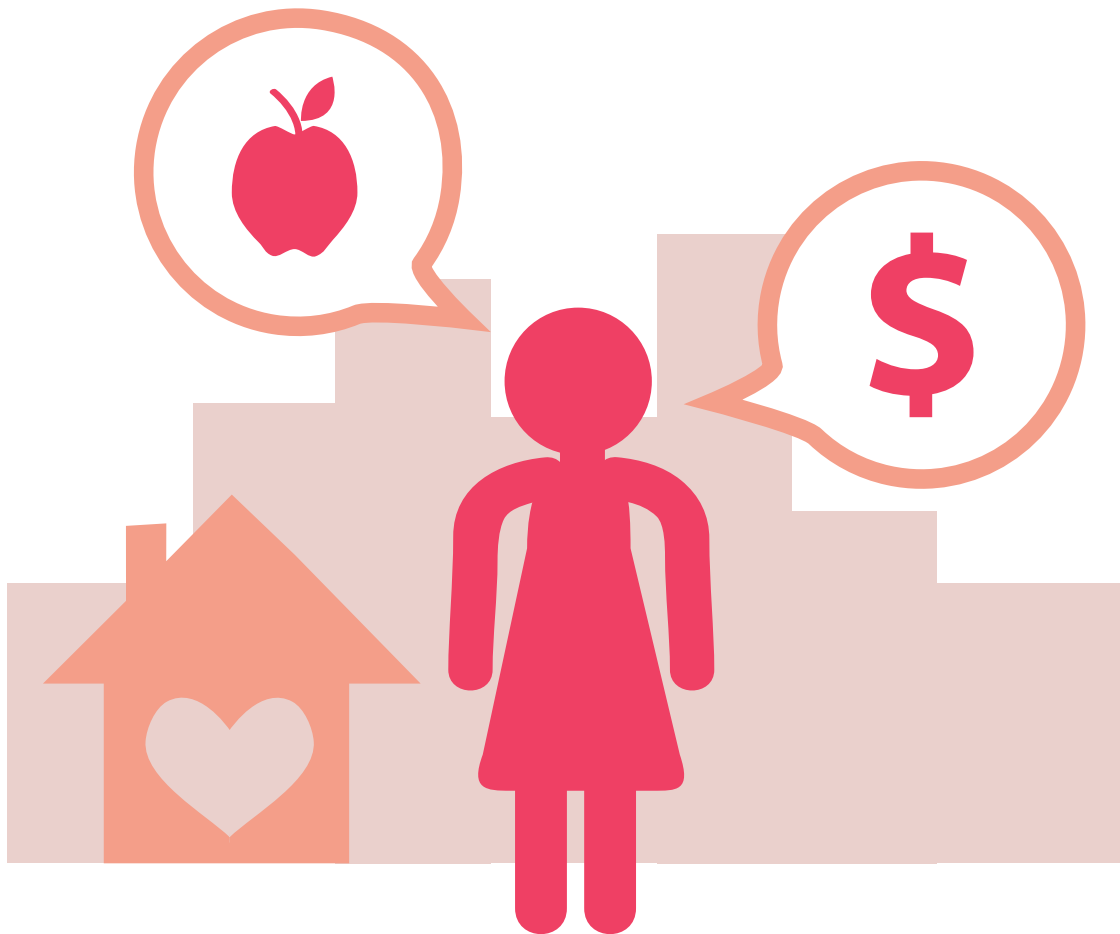
While abstinence only (“just say no”) approaches to sexual health are often embraced in the youth homelessness sector, there is little or no evidence base for their effectiveness with housed populations (Ott & Santelli, 2007; Underhill et al., 2007). Young people who experience homelessness face additional risks and pressures that make the effectiveness of such approaches even less likely. It is recommended that Housing First programs adopt comprehensive and gay positive sex education strategies in order address the sexual health of young people in a way that supports the development of healthy relationships and practices.

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 (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2013). A youthful age as well as a lack of experience, job readiness and training mean that young people have difficulty competing in the labour market and in most communities are unable to earn a living wage. Supporting young people to earn an income is an important task of Housing First. Equally important is ensuring they have support for, and access to, educational opportunities. This is key to addressing housing stability in the long term.

Education

Most people in Canada recognize the importance of education for young people and 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). Many young people who are homeless have dropped out of school at a young age or face challenges because the factors that contributed to their homelessness also led to school disengagement. While the drop out rate in Canada is under 9%, for homeless youth it is over 60% (Gaetz, 2014:9). 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

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. Social enterprise, or other training programs, that include life skills, money management and job readiness teachings are beneficial. Successful models such as Choices for Youth in St. John's, Newfoundland focus on not only training, but include 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. Assistance in obtaining and maintaining work is important.

While encouraging young people to get jobs 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 and access to rent supplements and government benefits and support if necessary.

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. This may include instrumental supports such as life skills, income supports, access to training, education and employment, but also and equally importantly, social supports, including strategies to enhance relationships and community engagement.

“The model for the program is actually really, really good because they give you a lot better teaching on how to live on your own than some of the other place that are transitional housing. They teach you life skills, cooking, how to keep a clean living space, stuff like that - stuff that’s very important for someone who wants to go out and live on their own. The program shows you how to deal with roommates, and co-exist with other people in the same space, and stuff like that.”
— Conor, Age 20, Hamilton, ON.

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 obtaining ID and health cards, help registering in school, shopping, 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.

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. Interventions can be active, or more passive, such as listening, validating viewpoints, helping young people learn from mistakes, etc. Finally, adults can provide important role models in terms of decision-making, conflict resolution and building positive relationships.



Family Reconnection

While the overwhelming majority of homeless youth have left households characterized by conflict (including a substantial percentage who have experienced abuse), the role of family in helping young people move forward should not be diminished or dismissed (Winland, 2013; Winland et al., 2011). 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. It is a client-driven case-management approach that seeks to identify and nurture opportunities to strengthen relationships and resolve conflicts between young people who leave home and their caregivers. Working with young people who are interested in developing healthier relationships with their families, staff offer individual and family counselling, family mediation, referrals to other agencies and services, psychiatric assessments, psychological assessments for learning disabilities, as well as accompaniment and advocacy assistance.

Supporting Youth with Children

Despite their age, many young people who are homeless are actually parents themselves. In a 2002 study (Gaetz, 2002) it was found that 19.1% of young people who were homeless were parents and 5.4% have more than one child (fewer than 40% currently live with their child). The actual experience of being young and homeless may precipitate the apprehension of children by child welfare officials. In a Housing First program, 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. Young parents themselves will need special supports and life skills training. When they move into transitional housing or independent living, it is important that they have access to housing with multiple rooms.

Anti-Discrimination Environment

Although homelessness is stigmatizing for all young people who experience it, many are doubly and triply marginalized due to racism, sexism, transphobia and homophobia. In fact, discrimination is an identifiable cause of homelessness and many young people continue to experience its negative impact once on the streets, from other young people, adults and unfortunately, from many service providers. For instance, homophobia is an established cause of youth homelessness, but unfortunately this kind of marginalization continues within the youth homelessness sector (Abramovich, 2012; 2013). Housing First programs, 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 supports for homeless youth should be to do no harm. Youth homelessness is in many ways about marginalization; the interventions including Housing First should not further entrench this.

Advocacy

It is important that youth are provided 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.

The first rule of supports for homeless youth should be to do no harm. Youth homelessness is in many ways about marginalization; the interventions including Housing First should not further entrench this marginalization.

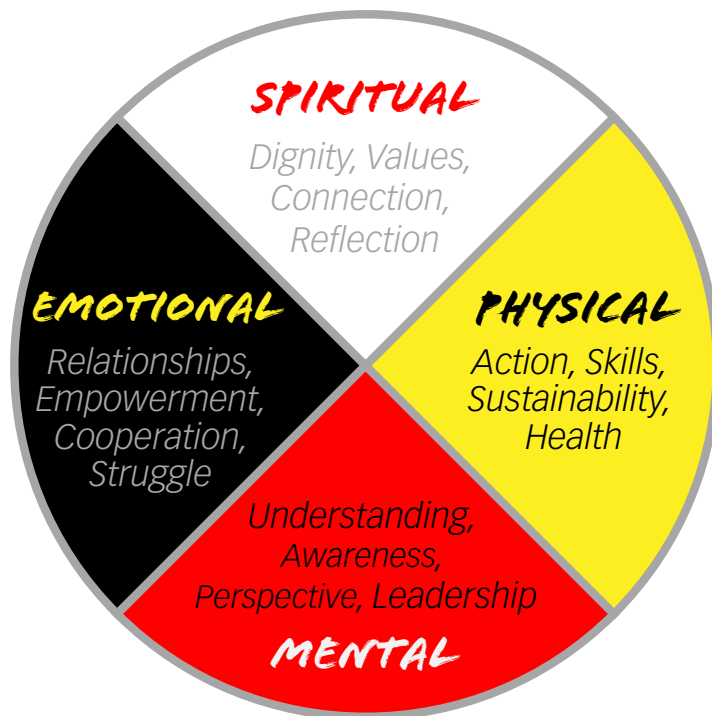
5. Opportunities for Meaningful Engagement

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. 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. For younger individuals, this is often achieved in a congregate living environment, where young people are surrounded by other youth and learn skills for engagement, conflict resolution and caring.

“I wasn’t all about wanting to be independent so much...Like I’ve been very family deprived and that’s why I loved Brennan [Transitional housing] so much. Well, I had a dysfunctional family from day one... not the white picket fence family which would have been alright growing up but when I was in Brennan House I was able to get that family and link up with friends. I always used to stay in then and never went out and partied. I was always there and it was enjoyable to come home and eat dinner with everybody and what not.”

— Alex, age 19, Hamilton, ON.

Figure 4: Medicine Wheel



Developing Social Relationships

Young people should be supported in developing positive relationships with peers, adults, employers, colleagues and landlords etc. This can be achieved through mentoring, conflict resolution training and most importantly, through the opportunity to practice healthy relationships. Because of early experiences of trauma and abuse, many young people are distrustful of adults and have difficulty forming attachments. Trust building is therefore an extremely important aspect of building social relationships and may be a necessary precursor to accessing other kinds of supports.

Community Engagement

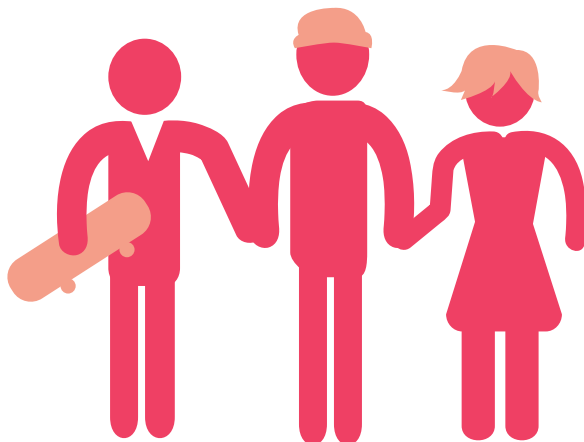
The opportunity to engage with communities of choice – whether people and institutions in the local neighbourhood, or making cultural connections (see below) is an important part of the Housing First agenda. Young people who become homeless often develop very close bonds with other street youth. While these relationships can be important, opportunities to integrate into communities is important for establishing broader support networks, reducing stigma and helping to leave the streets behind. Opportunities to volunteer can lead to both personal fulfillment and the opportunity to learn about giving back.

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. Because a large percentage of homeless youth are is important that Housing First programs enable young people to have the opportunity to engage with their history and make meaningful connections with community members. Enhancing cross-cultural connections is also important. For instance, the use of the Medicine Wheel in working with all young people, regardless of their backgrounds, has been advocated by many organizations.

Meaningful Activities

This also means giving young people the opportunity to participate in meaningful activities to learn skills, develop relationships and social skills. Opportunities to participate in arts based programs, sports, gardening, volunteering, pet care etc., should be encouraged as part of Housing First.



CONCLUSION

**"FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE
I AM NOT LIVING A PROGRAM. I
AM LIVING MY LIFE."**

Youth participant in the Infinity Project, quoted by Kim Wirth, BGCC.

The growing interest in Housing First and the strong evidence base for its success has clearly raised questions about its applicability for youth. 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.

As part of our youth framework, the core principles of Housing First have been adapted to reflect the needs of the developing adolescent and young adult. The ***Core Principles of Housing First for Youth*** include:

- 1. Immediate Access To Housing With No Preconditions**
- 2. Youth Choice And Self-Determination.**
- 3. Positive Youth Development Orientation.**
- 4. Individualized And Client-Driven Supports.**
- 5. Social And Community Integration.**

“The thing that really appealed to me was that I was going to be able to have a place to live in a nice area of Hamilton. My rent was subsidized, but it was a place of my own. I had a bed, I had my own room, a bathroom and a kitchen. Another thing that really appealed to me was that it was something that I could look forward to and try to excel at. I was so happy to be in this place! I sat down at my desk inside my room of this new place — I hadn’t really finished unpacking my stuff — and I sat down and I just thought in my head, ‘like, this is it...I’m done fighting, I’m done searching, this is a place that I can sleep at, a place that I can call my own’. I’d been searching for this for so long and this is finally happening, after years. This is what I have been fighting for tooth and nail, for however long.”

— Conor, age 20, Hamilton, ON.

Why do core principles matter? Housing First is more than a catch phrase, more than a brand. Those communities that adopt a Housing First approach for young people must be able to demonstrate to the core principles as outlined here and work to provide the range of accommodation options and supports described above. ***This includes ensuring young exercise choice and self-determination, and that appropriate housing options and supports be in place prior to implementation.*** All of this is important, because in a context where Housing First becomes more popular with policy-makers and funders, there may be pressure or a temptation to simply describe existing program models as Housing First. Not all transitional housing models – indeed, not all independent living programs - fit this framework and as such should not be described as Housing First. Fidelity to the core principles and program model of Housing First is paramount if the concept is to mean anything.

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. An extensive review of research and an engaged conversation with key service providers, as well as young people who have experienced homelessness, has produced a number of conclusions.

Addressing youth homelessness means youth-focused approaches.

The causes of youth homelessness are unique and so are the remedies. We can no longer be satisfied by taking adult approaches to addressing homelessness and make “homelessness junior.” Any response to youth homelessness must address the needs of developing adolescents and young adults. This framework blends what we know works in terms of Housing First, with what we understand are the needs of adolescents and young adults, and in particular those who have experienced homelessness. This means building the model from a healthy youth development perspective. It means adapting Housing First – in terms of core principles as well as models of accommodation and supports – to meet the needs of young people.

Housing First CAN work for young people.

We began with the question, “Does Housing First work for young people?” There is emerging evidence from some programs such as Infinity in Calgary that it is an effective intervention for youth. Other research suggests that the mainstream model of Housing First – one designed for chronically homeless adults – is a solid intervention, but needs to be modified for young people, taking into account their needs. The model should neither be rejected outright as inappropriate for youthful individuals, nor should the adult model be simply implemented in a straight forward way. It needs to be adapted in a way that makes sense for young people and meets their needs.

Housing First for youth requires different models of accommodation.

The framework presented here identifies that there need to be a range of housing options to meet the needs of young people who are transitioning to adulthood. The success of Housing First has raised questions about the need for transitional housing. It is suggested here that if client choice is a paramount principle of Housing First, then transitional housing needs to be an option, as many young people prefer it and it may better meet the needs of some, particularly younger teens.

Housing First only works for youth if there is an adequate supply of affordable housing.

In communities with an inadequate supply of affordable housing, implementing Housing First for youth becomes a challenge, because of the lack of earning power of young people and age discrimination. Strategies to end youth homelessness that embrace Housing First must also 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.



Housing First supports must be youth oriented.

The focus of supports should be to assist adolescents and young adults in their transition to adulthood, 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.

**HOUSING FIRST IS NOT
THE ONLY SOLUTION TO
YOUTH HOMELESSNESS,
BUT IT IS A KEY ONE.**



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.

APPENDIX

Project Collaborators



The Street
Youth Planning
Collaborative

In order to address the complex and unique needs of street-involved and homeless youth in Hamilton, the SYPC exists as a committee to advocate for, support and facilitate an enhanced, seamless system of services that is both comprehensive and accountable. The SYPC is a multi-stakeholder, community-based group that consists of directors and front-line workers of street-involved youth serving agencies. As well, members of the SYPC include youth with current or former experience of street-involvement or homelessness.

List of The Street Youth Planning Collaborative members & Housing First workshop participants

SYPC Members

- Sue Kennedy — *Alternatives for Youth*
- Denise Scott — *Wesley Urban Ministries*
- Karen Craig — *Living Rock Ministries*
- Susan Barberstock — *Hamilton Regional Indian Centre*
- Loretta Hill-Finamore — *Good Shepherd Youth Services*
- Brian Kreps — *City of Hamilton*
- Erika Morton — *Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton*

Youth Leader's Committee

- Alex
- Anna
- Conor

Youth Housing Support Project Partners

(With the SYPC)

- Shawn Chisholm — *Children's Aid Society of Hamilton*
- Rocco Gizzarelli — *Catholic Children's Aid Society of Hamilton*
- Paula Forbes — *Catholic Family Services*

Additional Workshop Attendees

- Amy Watson — *Wesley Urban Ministries*
- Al Craig — *Living Rock Ministries*
- Chris Maleta — *Good Shepherd Youth Services*
- Chris Evans — *Good Shepherd Youth Services*
- Dawn Kidder — *Good Shepherd Youth Services*
- Mike Case — *Good Shepherd Youth Services*
- Jennie Vengris — *City of Hamilton*
- Debora Emberson — *Children's Aid Society of Hamilton*
- Marilyn Burke — *Catholic Family Services*

THE NATIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY ON YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness

The National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness is a pan-Canadian network of leading youth serving organizations across the country who work collaboratively on key issues, share promising practices and develop strategies and tools to strengthen our sector and work towards preventing, reducing and ending youth homelessness in Canada. Founded in 2006 through the National Initiatives Program of Eva's Initiatives (Toronto), we are the only pan-Canadian network of its kind on youth homelessness. Collectively, we provide supports and services to over 15,000 young people every year.

2014 Members

- Wyndham House — *Guelph, ON*
- Intervention Programs — *Dans la Rue, Montreal, QC*
- Boys and Girls Club of Calgary — *Calgary, AB*
- The Doorway — *Calgary AB*
- Kingston HomeBase — *Kingston, ON*
- Saint John Human Development Council — *Saint John, NB*
- Broadway Youth Resource Centre — *Vancouver BC*
- Resource Assistance for Youth — *Winnipeg, MB*
- Saskatoon Community Youth Arts Programming Inc. — *Saskatoon, SK*
- Niagara RAFT — *St. Catharines, ON*
- Phoenix Youth programs — *Halifax NS*
- Choices for Youth — *St. John's NL*
- St. John's Advisory Committee on Homelessness — *St. John's, NL*
- Eva's Initiatives — *Toronto, ON*
- Youth Services Bureau — *Ottawa, ON*
- YMCA of Greater Toronto — *Toronto ON*

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