



**Federal Strategic Plan Youth Workgroup
U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness**

Comments by the
National Center for Housing and Child Welfare
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The National Center for Housing and Child Welfare (NCHCW) links housing resources and child welfare services through training, technical assistance, and advocacy in order to improve family functioning, prevent family homelessness, safely reduce the need for out-of-home placement, and ensure that each young person who ages out foster care is able to access safe, decent, permanent housing. NCHCW is committed to ending homelessness for all Americans.

For the benefit of the Council and in deference to our partners in the National Homeless Advocates Group, such as the National Network for Youth, the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, and the COHHIO YEP whose expertise is unmatched in issues related to youth homelessness and in bringing homeless youth to the table to advocate for themselves, our comments will focus primarily on best practices and recommendations for preventing homelessness among youth leaving foster care.

Strategies to address youth homelessness must address the multi-systemic and complex nature of the issue – and the fact that foster care feeds this problem.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2004) estimates that 1.6 million children between the ages of 16-17 run away from home and experience homelessness each year. Perhaps as many as half of these children are encouraged to leave by their families – others make the dangerous but courageous choice to leave in order to flee sexual, emotional, and physical abuse (Greene, Ringwalt, Kelly, Iachan, & Cohen, 1995). These young people turn to the streets living in abandoned buildings, tents, or temporarily share space with friends, strangers, and all too often, dangerous predators (sometimes referred to as “couch-surfing”). According to Burt et al (2001) many homeless youth have experienced foster care placements and a third of homeless adults report a history of foster care. Recent AFCARS data shows that 9,766 children ran away from foster care in 2008 (HHS, 2009).

A recent study by Fowler (2010) found that while 57% of foster youth are able to gain stability upon exit from care, the increasing number of young people aging out of foster care without adequate housing supports is feeding the adult shelter system. According to HHS, the number of youth aging out of care is increasing at an alarming pace. In 2000, the number of youth that emancipated from foster care was 20,172 – by 2008, that number had grown to 29,516 (HHS, 2009). Though it is impossible to track the outcomes of each of these young people,

several studies indicate that perhaps as many as a quarter of these young people will experience homelessness within a year of emancipation from foster care (Courtney & Hughes-Huering, 2005; Dworsky, 2005; Festinger, 1983; Pecora, Kessler et al., 2005).

Summary of best practices and barriers to best practices

In order to prepare young people aging out of foster care for a successful transition to adulthood, communities must offer a wide range of independent living options. Though empirical research is just now beginning to catch up with the many innovations in the independent living movement over the past two decades, NCHCW has identified several best practices in the field. Some of these programs are listed below:

- Perhaps the best example of a seamless and bi-directional continuum of housing options can be found in Hamilton County, OH at the Lighthouse Independent Living Program. Through a mix of federal, state, local, and to some extent, rent paid by the youth themselves, Lighthouse Independent Living Program matches youth with developmentally appropriate placements ranging from family foster care to independent apartments. In the event that a placement fails, young people are not expelled from the program, but rather helped to move into a more supported placement (such as a host home) while they prepare for returning to independence. Youth are never put out on the street. A recent study found that at discharge, 60% of clients had completed high school or obtained their GED, 31% were employed or had completed a vocational training program, and one-third (33%) were living independently, either by themselves or with a friend, in their own apartment, room, or house (Kroner & Maris, 2008).
- The Illinois Department of Children and Families (DCFS) uses Chafee dollars to support its Youth Housing Assistance Program. The project provides housing advocacy and cash assistance services for youth at risk of becoming homeless who have already transitioned or are preparing to exit the foster care system and have not yet reached 21.
- Sites in Florida and California (including the noteworthy First Place for Youth Program and the John Burton Foundation) use a mix of child welfare and other state funding subsidize scattered site housing for youth aging out of foster care including the Low Income Housing Tax Credit, HOME, CDBG, private development dollars, and rent paid by the youth participants.
- The Housing Authority of the City of Las Vegas (HACLV) signed an MOU with the local department of child welfare and created a local waitlist preference to ensure that when the Housing Choice Voucher Wait list opens 50 eligible foster youth through will be referred and provided with services matched with

vouchers. New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) and the Administration for Children's Services have had a similar arrangement since 1999.

- The Colorado Family Unification Program (FUP) serves former foster care youth experiencing homelessness. In 2001, the Colorado Department of Human Services received 100 FUP vouchers. These Section 8 vouchers last for 18 months and are targeted specifically for youth ages 18–21 that leave foster care at age 16 or older with inadequate housing. The Department recently partnered with Mile High United Way to expand the case management component. Van Leeuwen (2004) found that this approach to permanent supportive housing for homeless youth cost a tenth of a placement in youth corrections or residential treatment. Supportive housing averaged \$5,378 annually compared to \$53,655 for corrections and \$53,527 for residential treatment.

As evidenced by the examples above, when tapped by savvy and motivated child welfare professionals such as John Cheney Egan (IL DCF), Susan Hamilton, (Commissioner, Connecticut, DCF), and Andrew Johnson, (Colorado Department of Human Services), existing federal housing policy can be extremely effective in preventing and ending homelessness among young people aging out of foster care. Extraordinarily committed public housing authority directors such as Deloris Sawyer (HACLV), Michael Mirra (Tacoma, WA), and Michael Kelly (NYCHA) are necessary as well to make these partnerships possible. Indeed, more than 350 marriages of HUD-funded housing programs and HHS/Children's Bureau-funded social services exist throughout the country – and again, these partnerships are made possible by existing discretion allowed through existing federal policy.

The majority of these partnerships formed as a result of HUD's Family Unification Program, but a number including NYCHA and HACLV (mentioned above) while based on the FUP model – are independent of FUP. NCHCW has found that a major barrier to these kinds of partnerships for both families and youth in child welfare is that housing interventions are not sufficiently embraced by the traditional child welfare training and program development arm of HHS.

Given that much of the innovation suggested in our review of best practices is possible under current federal policy, the FSP should encourage communities to direct existing child welfare funds toward housing interventions to prevent homelessness. That being said, however, no amount of creative thinking, training, or budget slight-of-hand eliminates the desperate need for more affordable housing resources nationwide.

The nation requires significant federal investments in affordable housing to restore a nearly thirty-year gap in adequate funding for affordable housing at the federal level. The FSP must give priority to expanding a range of affordable housing opportunities to end homelessness for all Americans through significant investments in affordable housing. The Plan must call for the creation of at least 90,000 additional units of permanent supportive housing; an initial capitalization

of \$1 billion for the National Housing Trust Fund; and funding for 19,000 in new Family Unification Program vouchers from HUD's Tenant Protection Fund.

Effective federal government efforts to prevent and end youth homelessness

HUD's Family Unification Program (FUP) provides an excellent formula for local level partnerships between public agencies and social service providers. HUD and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services are encouraged to use FUP as a model for the creation of Memoranda of Understanding that facilitate resource sharing and relationship development between agencies at the local level.

All young people who age out of foster care at 18 are entitled to services through the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. This program provides a number of important supports to youth leaving foster care up the age of 21 including limited room and board assistance, educational and training vouchers, independent living programs, counseling and employment assistance.

While federal foster care eligibility ends at age 18, some states extend foster care eligibility to age 21. This practice goes a long way in preventing homelessness among youth leaving care. In October 2008, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (P.L. 110-351) was signed into law. This landmark child welfare language now allows states that opt to extend foster care beyond age 18 to draw down federal dollars to help cover the costs of assisting these young people.

The Fostering Connections Act also made a number of other changes to existing child welfare law that may begin to improve outcomes for youth aging out of foster care including educational rights, medical care, and improved family and sibling connections for children in foster care. Additionally, the law requires child welfare agencies to create a youth-directed plan for stable housing 90 days prior to discharge.

Suggestions for improvements in federal efforts to prevent and end youth homelessness

- Improve efforts to reunify homeless young people with their families when appropriate. Title IV-E child welfare funding must be made more flexible to allow for prevention and reunification services. Additionally, more funding is needed for the Safe and Stable Families Program, TANF, and other family support programs.
- Extend Chafee eligibility to all disconnected youth. Young people who have fled abusive foster care placements or have not been admitted to the child welfare system should not have to forfeit eligibility for this vital federal entitlement program – this will require more funding for the Chafee program.
- The Administration for Children and Families, perhaps with assistance and funding from the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness must add to its

National Resource Center structure, a national center that spans the boundary between HUD and HHS's Children's Bureau. Such a resource center would identify and share best practices for preventing and ending homelessness among families and youth in the child welfare system. Among other things, this center would provide cross-training and educational materials to arm front-line child welfare workers and independent living coordinators with the tools necessary to assist youth transition successfully to adulthood through housing interventions.

- HUD must change the regulations governing the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance to prohibit the involuntary separation of youth (of any age) from their families.
- The Secretary of Health and Human Services in issuing guidance on implementation of Section 201(d) of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P. L. 110-351) must clarify that placements for youth aged 18-21 may include living arrangements that do not require 24 hour on-site supervision.
- The Federal Strategic Plan to End Homelessness simply must require that states make housing a central feature of independent living curricula. In the words of Mark Kroner, one of the nation's leading experts on transition age foster youth, "independent living without housing is like driver's training without a car."
- USICH must encourage joint research on housing interventions for current and aging out foster youth between HUD Policy Development and Research and HHS ASPE/OPRE. This research would include information on well-being, stability, health, housing and income variables as well as information related to the interaction effect of housing interventions and HUD's Family Self-Sufficiency Program. This information could be coupled with or used to inform NYTD.

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