



Young people offer advice on staying  
connected and living independently



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES  
Administration for Children and Families  
Administration on Children, Youth and Families  
Family and Youth Services Bureau

You survived the streets for days or maybe months. Then a street outreach worker tells you about a safe place to go for food, clothes, and a hot shower. Tired and alone, you decide to check the place out. It's an emergency shelter for homeless youth.

... A couple of weeks later, you move to a program where you can get housing and advice on how to live on your own. You may begin to talk to your family and get together with them for activities and holiday gatherings. After a while, you feel strong and ready to move on.

**Still, it may not be easy.**

Will you remember to pay your rent on time? Be able to juggle school and work? Living on your own takes more than a strong will and a positive outlook. When things go wrong you may have to ask for help. There's nothing wrong with making mistakes and needing a second chance.

In this brochure, young people tell their stories in their own words and offer advice to other young people making the trip to successful independent living.



# LEAN ON ME

Annelle's\* parents separated when she was just a year old. As a teenager she bounced back and forth between her parents. Her mother kidnapped her at one point, but eventually sent her back to live with her dad and stepmother in Aspen, Colorado, until she was 16 years old.

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*I was like Cinderella. I had to wait on people hand and foot. I would go to school, come home, clean the house, make dinner, put the food away, clean the dishes, do all the laundry.*

One day her father decided that she would be better off living with her mom in Denver.

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*He took me to this gas station in Colorado Springs and dropped me off with all my stuff. I called my mom and she came and got me.*

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*\*Names of the young people have been changed*

She started using marijuana and drinking at age 12. At 16, after bonding with a group of homeless youth, she started using heroin and methamphetamine. She ended up hitchhiking around the country. She moved from California to Arizona to New Mexico and back to Colorado.

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*I might go to California for a few months, but I would always come back to Denver. When you're strung out, you don't really go anywhere. I would be down in the mall area where you could hustle money and buy drugs, and that's where outreach really got to know me. They told me about the STAR Program for like a year before I was finally, like, 'Okay, I'm ready.' I had no one left. This was not the life I wanted to live, I deserved more for myself.*

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Annelle entered the STAR transitional living program, and within the first 24 hours, staff members contacted her parents and began to help them communicate with each other.



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*I was able to talk to people there like I was a normal person. That let me know that someone out there really did care about me unconditionally. They were not there to judge me.*

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She started undergoing group therapy, substance abuse treatment, and counseling and lived in the program's 17-unit apartment building for a year and a half.

She successfully graduated from the program. The proof of how far she had traveled came when her agency offered her a job as an outreach counselor. Now she lives in her own apartment and works with other young people who are on the streets, helping them to leave the streets and live constructive lives. And she has reconnected with her mother.

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*Being in the program put me in the position to show her that I got my stuff together. It took me a minute to get her trust back. But now she totally trusts me and that's awesome. We talk all the time and it's the best feeling, like, you know, to have your mom be proud of you.*

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## Annelle offers these tips to youth:

- ◆ Lean on a support system. Reach back to the staff at the agency and tell them your successes and bumps along the road. When you spend so much of your life with someone, you want to keep in touch with them.
- ◆ Talk to a school counselor or outreach worker about substance abuse issues.
- ◆ Nothing is going to happen overnight. It may take years, and many good and bad days, for you to feel completely confident about living independently.



# TOOLS TO REALIZE YOUR DREAMS

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*The first 17 years of my life are probably not much like other kids my age that you might know. I was born in Colombia, adopted into an American family, and then kicked out when I began dating someone my family didn't approve of.*

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Juan found out he was too old for foster care and he ended up in a work camp. When he was released, the only place he had to go was on the streets. He found a transitional living program, and it was there that he began to feel hope.

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*I don't care who you are: everyone needs a safe place to be, whether it's your home, a relative's home, or, in my case, an agency. Safety and security help people's lives run when they are the most destitute. My agency provided me with the concrete things I needed for self-sufficiency: housing, assistance with getting a job and education, food, clothing, and safety. They also instilled in me a sense of hope, confidence, and responsibility. Their programs and my hard work helped me to reach my goals, but their staff's acceptance, advocacy, and encouragement helped me to realize my potential.*

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Juan was able to practice playing his music every day with a piano that was donated to his agency. The agency's employment and education program connected him to opportunities with a local children's theater, where he gave piano lessons to children. His agency also supported him as he prepared to apply to colleges.

Juan is now a student at The Julliard School of Music in New York City. Having a creative outlet and pursuing his passion allows him to greet each day with new confidence.



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*Like all of us, I still have challenges. But I know I can come back to my agency and have someone help me overcome them. I know I can succeed and make all of my dreams come true. Without my agency this would not be possible. In big and small ways, life does get better when there's somebody there to show you that you matter.*

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## Juan offers these tips to youth:

- ◆ My agency helped me with a weekly college preparation workshop and helped me study for the Scholastic Aptitude Test that allowed me to get into college. They also assisted me with basic needs such as getting a job, food, clothing, and a safe place to stay. It is important to take advantage of as many services as you are able to when you have the chance.
- ◆ Pursue your passion. I have always had a passion for music and never thought that I would be going to college to play with other people with a similar passion. Never give up on yourself.

# SECOND CHANCES

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*My son's father was very abusive. I had gone to the Battered Women's Project and they referred me to a transitional living program for pregnant and parenting teens. I was there for 8 months and went to school and parenting groups. I graduated and I moved out.*

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Megan moved back to her old neighborhood where her son's father and family still lived. She thought that she would be safe because her son's father was in prison.

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*One day me and my son's grandmother got into a really big fight, and my son's father was getting out of prison. I called my agency and told them I needed to come back.*

This time, Megan stayed in the agency's basic center program for two weeks. From there, she was referred back to the transitional living program for pregnant and parenting teens.

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*I felt very safe there. They helped me with parenting my son and getting him on a schedule. They helped me get a car through Goodwill, and the agency helped me as far as life skills.*

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Staff members helped her to find an apartment that was far away from her ex-boyfriend. Megan recently took a certified nursing assistant course and got a job.

“

*I feel like I owe my agency everything. They took a big chance on me coming back. Now I feel like all they really wanted to do was see me succeed. In the end it is so worth it. I never thought I would be where I am today. I never thought I would have a nice apartment, a car, and be able to make choices on my own.*

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Megan keeps in touch with her agency and returns often when she needs extra support or wants to visit staff members and let them know how well she's doing.



# Megan offers these tips to youth:

- ◆ Everybody makes mistakes, and the staff at your agency understands that. Don't be afraid to ask for a second chance.
- ◆ Ask advice of staff members. They will tell you if you should return or if it's safe for you to be out on your own.



# CHECKLIST FOR YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO INDEPENDENCE

- ◆ Before you leave to live on your own, have you talked to a staff member?
- ◆ Do you have a trusted life coach or mentor to talk to?
- ◆ Have you given staff a way to keep in touch with you?
- ◆ Have you received referrals for medical care, dental care, housing, jobs, school, GED programs, counseling, military service programs, and/or other programs?
- ◆ Have you found a peer support group that you would feel comfortable joining?
- ◆ Do you have the program's phone number and hotline numbers?
- ◆ Do you know where to find post offices, libraries, employment and education services, public transportation, supermarkets, and recreation centers?
- ◆ Do you know when your agency will be having their next social activity, like a holiday event or dinner?
- ◆ Stay in touch! If you need help or someone to talk to and you can't reach your agency, call 1-800-RUNAWAY, a hotline for youth.

*Please tear off the postcard  
on the following page and let  
your agency know how you've  
been doing!*

For more information regarding family and youth programs,  
please contact the National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth:

NCFY

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Silver Spring, Maryland 20911-3505

Phone: (301) 608-8098

Fax: (301) 608-8721

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visit the FYSB Clearinghouse Web site: <http://ncfy.acf.hhs.gov>

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*Just wanted to stay  
in touch...*

*Here's what I've been doing since I last  
saw you:*

- ◆ \_\_\_\_\_
- ◆ \_\_\_\_\_
- ◆ \_\_\_\_\_

*Here's how you can reach me:*

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Place  
stamp  
here

Place label with your agency's  
name and address here