

Listening Session Summary: Focus on Housing

Location: Houston, TX

Date: November 18, 2010

Approach

The Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs (IWGYP) hosted a series of listening sessions across the country to gather input from stakeholders to inform the development of an overarching strategic plan for federal youth policy. In order to go in depth on specific issues, each listening session had a special focus topic, such as juvenile justice, housing, positive youth development, and others. Sessions lasted approximately four hours and were led by an experienced facilitator.

Participants

See Appendix A for participant information.

Questions and Responses

Summaries of participants' responses follow each of the questions below.

What is the single most important thing we could do to make a difference in the lives of youth, related to housing?

- Make **safe, affordable housing** available to everyone.
- **Stabilize families** so that they are better able to meet young people's needs at home.
- **Educate families and youth** about how they can change their situation.
- Help youth to start learning about housing at an earlier age.
- Create **individualized** family housing plans.
- Provide housing that includes **wraparound services**.
- Teach youth **self-advocacy**.
- **Engage youth** in planning and policy development that is relevant to them.
- Develop young people's **life skills and resilience** earlier in life.
- Build young people's understanding of how education, housing, finance, etc. are interconnected.
- Provide better **transportation**, especially for youth with disabilities and mental health issues.
- Provide better **supportive housing** for vulnerable youth.
- Be aware that some youth require **extended housing support** to avoid becoming homeless.
- **Build awareness** among service providers regarding the needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth.
- Change conflicting federal, state, and local laws that can leave service providers unable to support young people, or uncertain as to whether they are allowed to help them.

What are the needs of youth (up to the age of 24) related to housing?

All youth

- All housing must provide a **safe and supportive** environment.
- Youth need **affordable housing** (because minimum wage jobs limit housing options).
- Youth in rural areas have little housing available and few housing supports.
- Housing supports for youth should be **individualized**.
- Young people and their families need support to develop a **realistic housing plan**.

- Policy makers and community members should be educated about how to support youth.
- Parents should be educated about how to help their children transition to independent living.
- Sometimes the whole family needs **cross-generational services** and housing.
- Young people and their adult caregivers need to be **empowered**.
- Youth need to **develop life skills** such as those previously taught in home economics classes.
- Youth need supports for social and emotional learning, life skills education, addressing trauma, and providing stability to **build resiliency early on** so fewer youth become homeless.
- Public transportation systems can be overwhelming in urban areas, and absent in rural areas.

Youth with special concerns

- Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth must be served **equally to other youth**.
- Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth must be in a supportive living environment and become **part of their communities**.
- Unaccompanied homeless youth have special needs, and may refuse to enter foster care.
- Homeless teens often face **age barriers** to obtaining services if they are too old to start foster care and too young to receive adult services.
- Young mothers are not a good fit for housing options designed for the general population.
- Young people with special needs can require **alternatives to public transportation**.

What are effective programs and strategies regarding housing? Are there program or policy gaps?

Effective programs and strategies

- Rusty's Program (University of South Florida) provides a dorm-type facility for youth with **wraparound services** on the premises and **individualized plans**.
- A multi-service campus in San Antonio provides **accessible, comprehensive supports** for homeless individuals and families.
- Houston Area Community Services provides supportive transitional family housing, **recognizing diverse types of families** (e.g., multi-generational, unmarried parents, same-sex parents, etc.).
- Texas A & M and the Texas Office of Border Affairs collaborate to bring **resource centers to isolated communities** that completely lack infrastructure.
- Increased **kinship placements and extended services for foster youth** have improved outcomes.
- The Permanency Care Assistance Program provides extended family with adequate supports to permanently assume care for youth in foster care.

Program and policy gaps

- HUD provides a down payment for families to own their own homes, giving the family stability and hope – but the same resources not available for young people aged 18-24.
- **Extended families need to be strengthened** to be able to assume care for more foster youth.
- More kinship care situations must be legally formalized to help relatives meet children's needs.
- Individuals with mental health issues and/or a high level of instability need **increased options** and supports to benefit from housing services.
- There can be significant barriers to providing services to individuals who are undocumented, or to the children of undocumented parents.

Do specific populations of youth have disproportionately poor outcomes related to the topics we have addressed? What are some ways to best serve these populations?

Populations with disproportionately poor outcomes

- **Youth transitioning out of foster care** are at very high risk for homelessness and other issues.
- **Youth exiting the juvenile justice system** have a tremendous need for support.
- **African-American youth** have disproportionately poorer outcomes.
- As schools increasingly focus on academics to the exclusion of other areas of development (e.g., sports, art), **young people who are not good at academics** become more likely to drop out.
- **Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth** have poorer outcomes, and may resist seeking services or help from caregivers because they have an expectation that they will not be treated well.
- **People with mental health issues** are stigmatized, and many service providers and community organizations are frightened of them and/or do not know how to provide the right supports.

Best ways to serve these populations

- Mental Health First Aid is an evidence-based practice that shows community organizations how to deal with **young people with mental health issues**.
- **Young parents** need different services than what is typically offered for their age group.
- Youth programming should have a different focus for younger children, teens, and young adults.
- Provide more **afterschool programming**.
- Use the **faith community** more to meet people's service needs.
- **Communities** need to step in and provide support for their young people.
- Communities must be better prepared to support youth exiting the juvenile justice system.
- States are starting to better prepare foster youth for independent living.
- Allow service providers to ask youth about sexual orientation or gender identity, so they have the information they need to request grants to serve specific vulnerable groups of youth.

What programs really make a difference in the lives of youth? How do you know this?

- Casey Family Programs help foster youth and provide **professional development** to caseworkers.
- Programs such as Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays provide training for service providers regarding gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth.
- **Family preservation programs** benefit gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth.
- **Strengths-based approaches** build up communities to care for young people.
- The Children's Aid Society's evidence-based teen outreach program takes a service learning approach and improves outcomes by making youth a part of their community.
- **Systems of care models** for mental health should be adapted to other service areas.
- The **business community** is important because they have daily contact with youth.
- Programs benefit youth when they help them develop a **shared, positive vision** regarding their role in the community.
- Programs work better when **youth are engaged** (e.g., some towns have recently engaged youth in a healthy adolescents initiative).
- **Positive youth development programs** (such as Educating Youth by Enhancing Society) develop young people's critical thinking, asset building, leadership capabilities, and positive outlook.

What are the barriers to collaborating on youth outcomes, and how can these barriers be removed?

Barriers to collaboration

- Everyone has a different definition of “collaboration.”
- When diverse agencies collaborate, they may not share the **same desired outcomes**.
- There can be a **lack of trust** among agencies that are supposed to be collaborating.
- Service providers can be **reluctant to collaborate** with an agency for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth.
- Some agencies are **hesitant to get involved** because they think that youth have too many needs and problems.
- Young adults do not get what they need from adult systems, are no longer eligible for services for children, and they and their families are left to figure things out on their own. Continuity of services is important, but once an individual transitions out of a system, **information gets impounded** and cannot be used to inform next steps.
- Multiple service plans and providers can leave families overwhelmed.
- It is **not legal to ask questions of unaccompanied minors** seeking services, so lack of data on this population makes it difficult to provide the right services.
- Grants are structured to provide focused services, but sometimes a broader approach is needed.

How to remove barriers to collaboration

- Each collaborating partner’s **role needs to be clear**.
- When diverse agencies collaborate, they need **lines of communication** and a shared language.
- There is a **need for true leadership** at the table for a collaborative effort to work.
- **Dedicated resources** are required for a collaboration to be sustainable.
- Youth-serving organizations must **help partners understand adolescent development** and needs.
- Agencies applying for grants should engage with the grantmakers to **make their needs known**.
- Agencies should collaborate to apply for larger grants to provide more comprehensive services.
- Grant applicants should **better inform grantmaking agencies** regarding their local situation.
- How you **package and market an initiative** is critical to getting support and collaboration.
- Service providers need to collaborate to **individualize services** for clients with diverse mental health issues.
- Service providers need to **ask families and youth what they need** rather than telling them what they need, or giving them a “package” based on where they seem to fit.
- Agencies need to learn how they can help young adults and their families access needed services from other agencies.
- Agencies need to take responsibility and **lobby for regulatory change** when they see a need.
- Young people should be supported to become engaged in government.
- **Let youth and families become real decisionmakers and partners** in their agencies.

What types of initiatives could promote collaboration and improve outcomes for youth?

- Develop community-level collaborations.
- Increase collaboration among **youth groups**, youth councils, and youth leadership.
- Provide more chances for **youth and family voices** to be heard.
- **Engage youth in policy and program development** from the state level down to the community level.
- **Ask youth to provide feedback** on services to the service providers they are using or have used.
- Ask young people to assist in **conducting social research** around effective programming.
- **Engage youth and families** to inform agencies how to better meet the needs of the community.

- Issue RFPs that **encourage collaboration and wraparound services**.
- Use systems of care approaches.
- Share information to engage in cross-agency strategic planning, define stabilizing and transitional roles, and share resources (e.g., America's Promise Alliance).
- Develop more **peer mentoring for youth** entering college, the workforce, and in the community.
- Help service providers learn how to encourage **peer support among clients** while maintaining confidentiality.
- **Tie funding to the young person** rather than to the service provider.
- Take the money currently given to schools to provide social services, and reallocate it to Health and Human Services so they can **provide better services** through schools.

What can be done for all youth (not just those directly benefiting from programs) in order to use resources effectively?

- Ensure that that there is **knowledge, availability, and an understanding of available resources**.
- Incorporate a **positive youth development framework** into everything we do for young people.
- Ensure that service provides are **culturally and linguistically sensitive** to young people's needs.
- Learn from young people and their families about how best to help them access services.
- Help families **network** with one another.
- Go where the clients are and learn from them.
- **Use schools to share information** about available supports with youth and families.
- Reinstate funding for **early intervention and prevention programs**.
- Use **wraparound services**.

What are your ideas for federal policy to improve the coordination, effectiveness, and efficiency of programs affecting youth?

- Ensure the **financial sustainability** of programming.
- Focus on **true accountability** by asking program clients to give feedback.
- Mandate agencies to partner across domains (e.g., housing, education, etc.).
- Mandate or encourage the **active involvement of youth and families** in program planning.
- Be careful when asking for mandates because they can also have unintended consequences.
- Improve available data on youth so it is less fragmented and more up-to-date.
- Help agencies to share information in a timely enough manner for continuity of services.
- **Revisit FERPA and HIPAA**, which place significant barriers to providing comprehensive services.
- Change laws so that service providers can ask questions of unaccompanied minors and thus better understand and meet their needs.
- Ensure that collaborations do not create more barriers than they remove and still allow for flexibility in meeting the needs of families in different situations.
- Require states to engage in cross-agency collaboration and collaborative funding, and provide a federal model.
- **Involve the community** in the design of programming that is intended to benefit them.
- Develop policies that strongly encourage states to have **youth advisory councils** at the state level, and allow state agencies to have easy access to youth who can act as a sounding board.
- Examine planned legislation and programming to identify what impact it would have on youth.
- Develop a **teen bill of rights**.
- Design a **comprehensive care model for adolescents** (based on the model for young children).
- Provide better transitional financial support to people moving off of public benefits to a paid job.

This work was originally produced by the American Institutes for Research in support of the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs through a contract from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The content does not necessarily reflect the position or policy of HHS, the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, or the other departments and agencies represented on the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs.

APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANTS from Region VI (Houston, TX)

Participating Organizations*:

- Blair Foundation
- Mental Health and Mental Retardation Authority of Harris County
- Harris Country Protective Services for Children and Adults, Systems of Hope
- Association of Family and Community Integrity, Inc.
- Houston Federation of Families
- American Institutes for Research, Technical Assistance Partnership for Child and Family Mental Health
- Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Houston
- Department of Housing and Urban Development
- Houston Alumni and Youth Center
- City of Houston
- Gulf Coast Community Services Association
- Home Builders Institute
- Houston Independent School District
- Houston Housing Authority
- Montrose Counseling Center
- Houston-Galveston Area Council
- Houston Area Community Services
- Rainbow Housing Assistance Corporation
- Texas Department of State Health Services

**Note: Participant information is only provided for participants who registered for the session and may not represent all organizations that were present.*