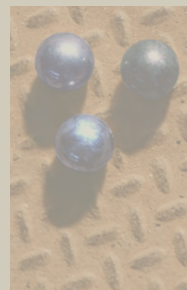


SPOTLIGHT ON PATH PRACTICES AND PROGRAMS

Practice Focus:
Serving Transition Age Youth



August 3, 2009



PATH

Projects for Assistance in
Transition from Homelessness

Acknowledgments

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Disclaimer

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INTRODUCTION

Between 5% and 8% — or as many as 1,700,000 — transition age youth experience homelessness each year (Fernandes, 2007; Office of Applied Studies, 2004; & Robertson & Toro, 1998). Youth are the fastest growing segment of the overall homeless population. They may also be more at risk for becoming homeless than other age groups (Burt et al., 1999; Governor’s Adolescent Health Council and Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 2003; Toro, Dworsky, & Fowler, 2007).

“Transition age youth” are commonly defined as individuals between the ages of 16 and 25 years. They have unique service challenges because they are too old for child services but are often not ready or eligible for adult services. Individuals technically become adults at age 18 years, yet many young people today live with their parents into their 20s. Individuals who experience homelessness at this time in their lives do not have the same social supports as other youth and are usually on their own. Many do not have the skills needed to secure employment and housing.

Many factors associated with youth homelessness mirror adult homelessness. These include substance abuse, mental illness, lack of education, unemployment, and poverty. However, family conflict and transitioning from foster care or juvenile justice systems are more specific to those who have experienced homelessness as youth. These difficult transitions require attention when delivering services to this age group.

In 1974, Congress addressed the unique needs of this population with The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA), which decriminalized runaway youth and allocated funding for supportive services. RHYA grants currently support the Basic Center Program, the Transitional Living Program, and the Street Outreach Program (Fernandes, 2007). While these grants specifically target transition age youth who experience homelessness, many programs serving this group blend federal and private funding streams to finance services (Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, 2005). PATH is one possible resource for programs serving transition age youth experiencing homelessness and mental illness.

PATH PROGRAMS AND TRANSITION AGE YOUTH

The PATH program reports age in clusters. Transition age youth fall into one of two clusters: 13 to 17 or 18 to 34 years old. This data collection method makes it difficult to determine the exact number of transition age youth served by PATH programs. Regardless, youth use “adult” PATH services, and some PATH programs specifically target older youth. Several programs use PATH funds specifically to serve youth in transition.

Outreach is a key component of the PATH program and is an effective strategy to reach youth who are disconnected from services. Outreach methods range from street rounds to referral driven outreach. In referral driven outreach, teachers, residential programs, and probation officers, among others, connect youth with outreach workers. Referral driven

outreach is particularly useful for programs in rural communities where outreach workers are responsible for large geographic areas.

Once the outreach relationship is established, effective assistance to youth can be provided by ensuring that safe and appropriate referrals are made to resources and services. PATH programs serving youth, especially programs that do not focus primarily on this group, can build relationships and partner with other youth service providers in the community to establish a referral network. Referrals to youth programs are particularly important for transition age youth because these individuals are just beginning to learn how to navigate the service system and may be unaware of available services.



CORE ISSUES: INDIVIDUAL

Mental Health

Youth experiencing homelessness are at greater risk than their peers for substance abuse and mental health problems such as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Cauce et al., 2000). Transition age youth can become eligible for PATH services if they have an adult mental health diagnoses; meet the severity, duration, and functioning criteria for serious mental health disorder; and meet the other eligibility criteria for PATH.

Physical and Sexual Abuse

Between 40% and 60% of youth experiencing homelessness have also experienced physical trauma, and as many as 35% were sexually abused prior to becoming homeless (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002; and Robertson & Toro, 1998). Many youth leave their homes due to abuse, only to be further victimized on the streets. PATH providers are often aware of the high incidence of trauma and abuse but may be reluctant to conduct a detailed trauma

assessment. A trauma assessment is often omitted to keep intake procedures brief and non-intimidating, but also to avoid raising issues that the PATH program may not be equipped to address. When indications of trauma and abuse do surface, PATH programs need to be prepared to provide support and referrals to appropriate service providers.

Substance Use

Up to 50% of youth experiencing homelessness report recent substance use — almost twice the rates than among their housed peers (Koopman, Rosario, & Rotheram-Borus, 1994; Office of Applied Studies, 2004). Substance use among young people is often a difficult issue to address because it can be a coping mechanism. Often, youth are unwilling to give up substances before supports are in place. Risk reduction education, motivational interviewing skills, and housing first options are effective tools for PATH programs to help mitigate the effects of substance abuse on safety and stability.

Health

Youth experiencing homelessness are also at risk for HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, and unintended pregnancies. They often lack negotiating skills and can be preyed upon by others. High risk behavior and abuse by others increase their need for medical care, health screening, prevention strategies and resources, and wellness counseling. PATH providers working with youth can assess for these issues and assist youth with accessing appropriate services. This will help them get and stay healthy by connecting them to medical care, HIV/AIDS counseling and testing, and counseling that addresses self-esteem and risky behaviors.



Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Intersex, and Two-Spirit (LGBTQI2-S)

Twenty-five to 40% of homeless youth identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (Ray, 2006). Parental reactions to sexual identity often contribute to the decision to leave home or being forced to leave home. Many shelter and other service providers do not have the experience and information to adequately respond to this group of youth. In order to ensure a safe space for youth, programs can designate a “safe zone,” a place where all sexual identities are viewed as valid and respected (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.). PATH programs can provide training for staff and work with counselors on specific skills related to the needs of this population. They can work to ensure that programs and services are available to LGBTQI2-S youth, such as drop-in centers, support groups, shelters that are recognized for being LGBTQI2-S friendly, and a listing of providers who are friendly. They also can communicate with referral sources to assure that appropriate services are provided in a non-judgmental atmosphere.

Family Issues and Emancipation

Family conflict is the most frequently cited reason for youth homelessness (Fernandes, 2007). For most youth, assisting them in returning home, providing help with the reunification process, and addressing the shame involved with the time they were on the streets is an effective practice. For others, returning home means a return to further abuse or rejection. Many service providers and programs focus on returning the youth home, and youth are



cautious of providers as a result. Youth who prefer to become independent have the option in most states to apply to be an emancipated minor. Interestingly, emancipation is uncommon. Laws related to emancipation vary from state to state. PATH providers can assess the appropriateness of family involvement and assist youth in reuniting with their families or help them live independently, legally, and in a safe environment.

CORE ISSUES: STRUCTURAL

Legal Issues

Legalities regarding the age of an individual are often a barrier to services. Youth under age 18 cannot legally sign themselves into some services and parents often must be notified and involved. For youth escaping abuse at home, this is a major challenge. Many states do have laws that allow shelters to provide services to underage youth or permit access to medical and mental health care without consent. Emancipation procedures can be explored in states that provide this option. PATH programs serving transition age youth should be aware of their legal rights and limitations, as the laws on these issues as well as runaway statutes vary from state to state.

Aging Out

“Aging Out” refers to youth who enter custody due to abuse or neglect, grow up in state custody, and do not return home or become adopted before their 18th birthday (MSPCC, 2005). Researchers have consistently identified a link between involvement in foster care and adult homelessness (Ammerman et al., 2004; Burt et al., 1999; MSPCC, 2005). While some service eligibility for youth extends to age 25, foster care most commonly ends at age 18. Youth leaving foster care usually do not have skills to support themselves, leading to a higher risk for homelessness. PATH programs typically are not in a position to prevent youth from aging out onto the streets. However, if they can assist youth in transitioning out of homelessness quickly and effectively, they can help reduce the chance that they will face homelessness again later.

Education

Formal education is often not a priority for youth experiencing homelessness. They are more often concerned with meeting basic needs and surviving on their own. Many are also ashamed of their situation and do not want the additional social pressures of school. However, public school systems often have alternative schools, night school, and technical career centers that youth would be eligible for until they reach a certain age or have received their diploma. PATH programs can help youth gain skills they need to obtain and maintain housing and employment. They can also help youth access the educational and job training services for which they are eligible. Teaching youth independent living and employment skills including financial literacy, how to access services, or obtain a driver’s license can also assist them in exiting homelessness.

Obtaining and Retaining Housing

The average cost per youth in foster care, in-patient treatment, or the juvenile justice system ranges from \$25,000 to \$55,000 annually, while the average cost to support an individual youth in a transitional housing program is \$11,800 (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2007). Despite the evidence of cost effectiveness, housing programs for transition age youth are uncommon. Waiting lists for such programs are often long and the availability of beds limited. To address this issue, PATH programs can provide housing assistance of varying intensities. PATH staff can assist youth in locating housing, completing rental applications, and providing support and independent living skills training after the youth

is housed. PATH programs can develop working relationships with landlords to facilitate housing acquisition and mediate the client-landlord relationship once youth are housed. For youth who are too young to enter into contractual relationships with a landlord, the PATH agency can master-lease the apartments or help the youth obtain representation to sign leases and other legal documents.

Benefits and Employment

Securing income through employment or benefits for youth is imperative to securing safe housing. Youth older than 16 can generally gain employment, but they will find that the jobs that are readily available do not pay enough to live independently in the community. Youth need to continue to work on job skills and employment opportunities so they can continue to support themselves later on. For those who need the support of Social Security Disability (SSI) income benefits, they must undergo a complicated review process when they become 18 years old to transition from child social security benefits to adult benefits. PATH programs can assist with securing benefits, job searches and job coaching, transportation, interviewing techniques, and finding friendly employers. PATH providers trained in SSI/SSDI Outreach Access and Recovery (SOAR) can assist with the reclassification application that occurs when the youth turns 18.



Transportation and Communication

Transportation is a consistent barrier for youth experiencing homelessness, especially in rural areas. In addition, youth are often difficult to reach because they do not have regular access to telephones. PATH programs can assist youth by connecting them to transportation services, providing transportation when needed, helping locate a resource for cell phones or phone cards, coordinating an effort to provide community voice mail services, and offering to be a contact person for them.

Stigma

Stigma surrounds all individuals who experience mental illness, substance abuse, or homelessness. Youth often hide their homelessness, making it difficult to identify them and concealing the issue from the larger community. They also may be resistant to talk about their mental health concerns, substance use, or history of abuse. PATH programs can educate the larger community to raise awareness about youth homelessness. They can also embrace these youth and provide an accepting and unconditional environment.

Youth-Staff Relationship

An important factor in youth development is a positive relationship with an adult (Resnick, 2000), an experience not often associated with youth who experience homelessness. PATH programs need to recognize the individual issues youth bring and the demands on the staff. It is important to take time to build trust. Below the hard exterior of the youth may be a child who has not experienced a supportive relationship and who needs to learn to trust adults. Consistency, patience, and persistence are central tenets in building a relationship.

Cultural Competence

Ensuring cultural competence is a critical component of service to youth. An organization's values, principles, behaviors, attitudes, policies, and structures can support effective cross-cultural work (Goode, Jones, Dunne, & Bronheim, 2007). Dimensions of cultural competence to consider include ethnic/racial backgrounds, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, disabilities, age, spiritual/religious beliefs, and these in context to regional perspectives. Layered on top of these issues are the cultural norms within the groups experiencing homelessness. While there may not be a youth "street scene" in every area, youth culture exists and may be a culture of independence from and resistance to adults and the system. Staff must understand this in order to effectively serve the youth population. PATH programs can collaborate with other youth programs to gain specific knowledge and skills to work effectively with this population. Trainings at youth or homeless conferences, and online materials are available. Engaging youth in this process is critical to inform the program, act as peer-providers, and provide feedback. Organizations can work to ensure that services are provided in a manner that is culturally informed and responsive.

CONCLUSION



PATH programs can improve services to transition age youth and young adults by assertively ensuring that their services are provided in a manner that is respectful, informed, and safe. Critical areas for training of staff include:

- recognizing trauma and providing trauma-informed services;
- identifying mental health disorders including PTSD in youth and younger adults;
- addressing issues of safety and trust;
- developing sensitivity to LGBTQI2-S issues for youth;
- generating strategies for assisting youth with employment, benefits, and housing; and
- understanding youth legal status issues and their right to educational services.

While most PATH programs are not designed specially to serve young people between the ages of 16 and 25 years, youth are often served alongside adults in PATH programs. It is important to recognize their unique needs, and that integrating transitioning youth back into mainstream resources and housing can prevent them from being homeless as adults.

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WHAT IS PATH?

Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness

The PATH Program—or Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness—was authorized by the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Amendments Act of 1990. PATH funds community-based outreach, mental health and substance abuse services, case management, and limited housing services for people experiencing serious mental illnesses—including those with co-occurring substance use disorders—who are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of becoming homeless.

PATH funds stimulate state & local contributions

PATH funds are worth more than their face value because they are matched with state and local resources. For every \$3 in federal funds, state or local agencies must put forward \$1 in cash or in-kind services. At a minimum, a \$52 million Federal allocation would result in a \$17 million match. In some states PATH funds and the state and local match are the only resources specifically for serving people experiencing homelessness and mental illnesses.



PATH providers deliver innovative services

PATH providers work with service delivery systems and embrace practices that work. These include:

- Partnering with housing first and permanent supportive housing programs
- Providing flexible consumer-directed and recovery-oriented services to meet consumers where they are in their recovery
- Employing consumers or providing consumer-run programs
- Partnering with health care providers, including Health Care for the Homeless to integrate mental health and medical services
- Assertively improving access to employment
- Improving access to benefits, especially through SSI/SSDI Outreach, Advocacy, and Recovery (SOAR)
- Using technology such as PDAs, electronic records, and HMIS

PATH providers are strong community partners

PATH providers and State Contacts are involved in local and regional planning efforts to end homelessness, including Continuum of Care, 10-Year Plans to End Homelessness, and other planning efforts. PATH providers and State Contacts work to ensure that services are coordinated and available to people experiencing homelessness.

For more information about PATH, please visit <http://pathprogram.samhsa.gov>



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