



A part of something: The importance of transitional living programs within a Housing First framework for youth experiencing homelessness



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ABSTRACT

Young people experiencing homelessness face severe threats to their health and well-being and while we know quite a bit about these risks, much less is understood about the usefulness of the services currently being provided to mitigate them. Transitional living programs (TLPs) are one of three core strategies executed by the federal government of the United States to address youth homelessness. The purpose of this phenomenological, qualitative study was to understand the impact over time of the housing and support services provided by a TLP directly from the perspectives of formerly homeless youth. Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 32 young people who exited a TLP located in Chicago, Illinois between 1 and 11 years ago. Participants believed TLPs to be an essential part of our solution to address youth homelessness, identifying themes of family, individual connections, community and preparedness that they believe uniquely qualify TLPs as a developmentally-appropriate program model for youth in times of housing crisis.

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1. Introduction

Research in the area of youth homelessness has concentrated on understanding the population – their needs, their experiences, the risks they face, and the etiology of their homelessness. Although important, this focus has resulted in a knowledge base almost entirely dedicated to understanding the characteristics of homeless youth rather than the service sector's efforts to respond to their needs (Kidd, 2012; Milburn, Rosenthal, & Rotheram-Borus, 2005). The level of imminent danger facing youth in situations of homelessness demands that we begin to understand the impact of services so we are able to direct limited resources to the most efficacious solutions. Global conversations are currently taking place about the most appropriate program models for youth in situations of homelessness (Dworsky, 2010; Gaetz, 2014; Pope, 2011). Simultaneously, overwhelming evidence supporting Housing First intervention strategies, predominately scattered-site individual apartment models, is shaping the direction of funding prioritization within the homeless service system as a whole (Goering et al., 2014; Tsemberis, 2010; Tsemberis & Eisenberg, 2000). Transitional living programs (TLPs), a congregate housing model for youth, are currently one of three core strategies executed by the federal government of the United States to address youth homelessness (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2014a). As such, it is imperative that we begin to understand if, and how, the services being provided

by TLPs are benefitting young people over time in order to understand if the program model has a place within a Housing First framework for youth.

1.1. The program model

For over 40 years, the primary federal response to youth homelessness in the United States has been the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) which authorizes several programs administered by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Since its original passage in 1974, RHYA has been reauthorized five times, most recently by the Reconnecting Homeless Youth Act in 2008 (P.L. 110-378). Transitional living programs were established during the 1988 reauthorization of RHYA to provide services for older homeless youth ages 16 to 21 who are unable to return home. The purpose of the program is to provide safe, stable living accommodations and a range of supportive services for up to 21 months to help young people develop the skills necessary to become independent (RHYA, 2008, P.L. 110-378, Title III, Part B, Section 322a). Services provided by TLPs include housing, counseling, life skills development, interpersonal skill building, educational advancement, job attainment skills, and mental and physical health care. In FY 2014, Congress authorized 43.65 million dollars to fund 200 transitional living programs across the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2014c, March 14). These programs provide services to over 3300 homeless youth each year and are consistently at capacity with over 1200 youth on waiting lists that continue to grow (DHHS, 2014d, October 14).

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1.2. Research on transitional living programs for homeless youth

Despite the demand for services and the prominent place of TLPs in our nation's plan to address youth homelessness, the effectiveness of the program as a service delivery model has yet to be formally evaluated beyond an understanding of immediate youth outcomes at the time of exit from the program.¹ The New England Network for Child, Youth, and Family Services explored the perspectives of four TLP service providers with regard to how the program impacts the lives of young people (Bartlett, Copeman, Golin, Miller, & Needle, 2004). Researchers found that each TLP program had its own definition of youth success but all generally included an evaluation of progress while in the program, comparing entry and exit indicators such as: housing status, educational attainment, development of life skills and reduction in substance use.

Giffords, Alonso, and Bell (2007) and Nolan (2006) also conducted case studies of TLPs, investigating how two different programs in New York City are currently providing services and measuring their impact. Giffords et al. (2007) examined outcome data from 44 youth who participated in a TLP program in 2005 at their exit from the program. They found that 93% of youth in the program acquired or continued to practice independent living skills, 91% had attended school, participated in vocational training or were employed over the last quarter, and 87% of youth moved into an appropriate setting for independent living upon discharge from the program. Nolan (2006) collected data from all youth served by a TLP for homeless LGBT youth from 2000 to 2005 ($N = 40$). Success was determined by the attainment of safe housing at exit as well as by progress made in the area of education. Nolan found that 77% of youth exited to a safe living situation, and 43% increased their level of education by obtaining a GED or attending a semester of college. Although both studies found promising support for the use of the TLP model for homeless youth, like the programs in New England examined by Bartlett et al. (2004), both studies lack an understanding of outcomes for youth beyond exit from the program.

There has been only one study in the United States to investigate outcomes of TLP services for youth following their exit from housing. Rashid (2004) found preliminary, descriptive evidence that TLPs may be a useful program model in an analysis of 23 youth in Northern California who participated in transitional living services following experiences of homelessness after leaving foster care. While Rashid's findings are based on a small, non-random sample, 87% of young people located at six months after their exit from the program had remained in permanent, stable housing.

1.3. Housing First

Housing First is an intervention approach to working with people in situations of homelessness that has arguably the most solid research base of any homelessness intervention currently being implemented (Goering et al., 2014; Tsemberis, 2010; Tsemberis & Eisenberg, 2000). It is defined by three primary characteristics: (1) moving people immediately into housing; (2) eliminating any preconditions for that housing as they relate to sobriety and compliance with mental health treatment; and (3) providing a range of supports for individuals once they are housed to help them sustain housing for the long-term. The foundation of Housing First is "the underlying principle that...people are more successful in moving forward with their lives if they are first housed" (Gaetz, Scott, & Gulliver, 2013, p. 12). It is logical, practical, cost-effective and grounded in the belief that housing is a basic human right.

Housing First interventions are predominately designed as scattered site apartment programs where individuals are placed directly into their own apartment while they receive the supports they need to obtain stability. With strong evidence of its effectiveness, Housing First programs

have rightfully become increasingly prevalent across the United States, more and more taking the place of emergency shelter and transitional (or interim) housing models (Da Costa Nunez, Adams, & Simonsen-Meehan, 2011). This movement toward Housing First, specifically as it is largely viewed as a scattered-site individual apartment model, further amplifies our need to understand if there is a place for transitional living programs, a congregate-housing model, in our response to youth homelessness. While young people in situations of homelessness are not a monolithic group and certainly have varied needs, their experiences leading up to and during periods of housing instability tend to be much different than older adults and families. Their reasons for homelessness, the types of harm they experience and the complex developmental transition of adolescence, require services that are prepared to respond accordingly (Gaetz, 2014).

1.4. Positive youth development

Positive youth development is an ecological, asset-based approach to social work practice that promotes healthy adolescent development through supportive, nurturing environments and services designed to foster meaningful connections to others and community (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004). Youth development research demonstrates that services that enhance the positive internal characteristics of young people such as social competencies as well as external assets such as positive support, enhance the potential for young people to not just survive the transition to adulthood, but to thrive (Leffert et al., 1998; Scales & Leffert, 2004; Wilson-Simons, 2007). To this end, key features of PYD interventions include: consistent emotional and moral support; opportunities to develop healthy and supportive relationships and to contribute to the larger community; the acquisition of coping strategies and other protective factors; opportunities for skill-building and mastery; the development of personal autonomy; and the importance of having the voices of young people heard and valued (Hamilton et al., 2004). Positive youth development is widely supported as an effective practice approach with youth experiencing homelessness (Heinze, Hernandez-Jozefowicz, & Toro, 2010) and, as such, all federally-funded TLP programs are currently required to implement the model.

1.5. The current study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceived utility of TLPs as a housing model for youth experiencing homelessness. There is a range of supportive housing models for youth facing housing instability (Dworsky, 2010; Gaetz, 2014; Pope, 2011). While there is evidence indicating that principles of Housing First and positive youth development should be incorporated into our solutions to youth homelessness (Gaetz, 2014), there is little empirical knowledge about the efficacy of any particular model. A lack of research on the effectiveness of TLPs for youth places them at risk for being phased out and/or underfunded in favor of scattered site, permanent supportive housing models that have been shown to be effective with families and adults.

This current gap in our understanding around the impact of particular housing models makes the perspective of young people who have participated in housing services highly valuable when seeking to understand what program designs and services are most useful. Further, Gilgun and Abrams (2002) warn that the voices of disenfranchised populations "are routinely suppressed within the many arenas in which their fates are debated and shaped" (Gilgun & Abrams, 2002, p. 42). As such, qualitative research methods were utilized in this study to propel the perspectives of youth who have experienced homelessness to the center of the discussion. A phenomenological approach facilitated the two-fold purpose of this study: first, to understand the experiences of participants since leaving TLPs; and, second, to explore how participants make sense of those experiences and how they perceive any relation to the services they received while in the TLP.

¹ DHHS is currently conducting a study measuring TLP outcomes at 12 and 18 months, results expected in 2016 (DHHS, 2014b, August 12).

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