

# Larkin Street Youth Services ... IN BRIEF

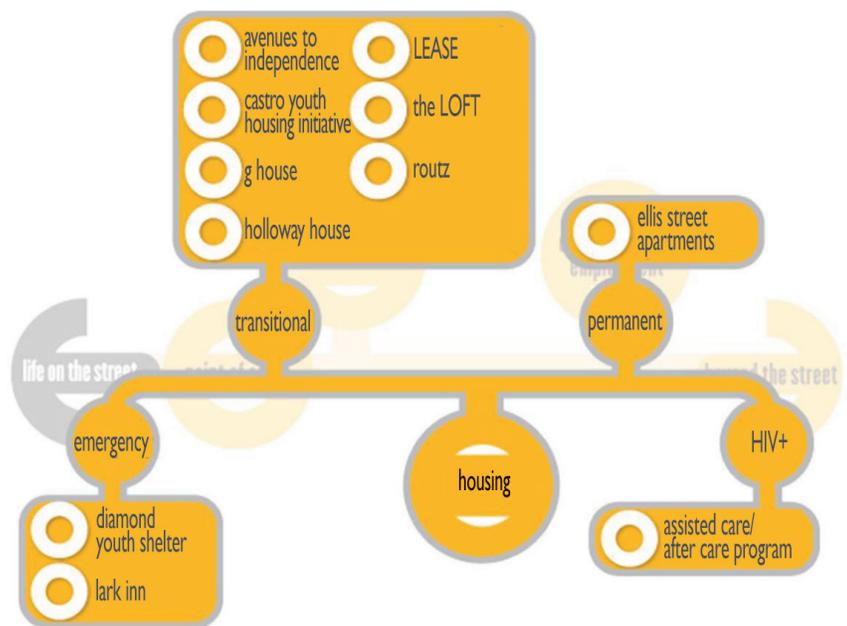
## A Comprehensive Youth Housing Model

Every year there are an estimated 1.8-2.1 million homeless youth in the United States who face multiple challenges to becoming independent, self-sufficient adults.<sup>1</sup> They struggle to survive from day to day, doing what they can to secure food and temporary shelter. Housing and support services are crucial in assisting these youth to move beyond the streets.

Housing is a crucial step to stabilizing the lives of homeless youth. In this article housing is used to describe any type of residential setting, including emergency shelter and congregate programs. There is an array of housing options available to serve the needs of homeless youth. Different housing types provide varying levels of support and independence. It also provides housing at a level that is aligned with the youth's readiness to transition from the streets. Youth are not required to move from more-restrictive to less-restrictive housing but rather can enter the most appropriate program within the housing continuum. These multiple entry points allow youth to be placed in the housing type that is most suitable for them rather than requiring youth to move through the various levels of housing. Housing provides stabilization for youth and increases their ability to participate in support services which are essential for long-term stability and self-sufficiency.

Larkin Street has developed a full continuum, from emergency to permanent housing, for homeless youth ages 12-24. A range of housing options are necessary to meet the diverse needs of homeless youth. The core support services

provided for residential program participants are case management, life skills, mental health, substance use, HIV prevention, employment, education, art, and medical care. This report outlines the types of residential programs included in Larkin Street's housing continuum.



### Housing Types

#### Emergency Housing

Emergency short-term housing is often the first step in the stabilization process for homeless youth. Larkin Street has two emergency housing programs – one serves youth ages 12-17 and the other serves older youth, 18-24. The main focus is to provide immediate safety and stability for youth while simultaneously engaging them in case management services to address the additional issues that may be impacting their ability to obtain and maintain housing. The goal is to connect youth to other

support services such as education, employment, mental health, and substance use services. The development of a housing plan that extends beyond emergency housing is one of the important steps for youth engaged at this level.

### Transitional Housing

Transitional housing programs are appropriate for youth who have achieved a level of stability in their lives. Youth must be able to set goals and follow-through with their case plans. There are two types of transitional housing offered by Larkin Street: congregate and community-based housing. The types differ in terms of staffing patterns, programmatic expectations, and rent payment. Youth in all transitional housing programs receive case management and additional support services.

The guiding philosophy for transitional housing programs is to create an environment that closely mirrors real life, while also providing a safety net for youth that facilitates development of independent living skills. Youth are seen as the primary agents of change in their lives and actively participate with staff to collaboratively create individualized case plans to meet their goals.

*Congregate Housing.* Congregate housing is a single site housing model, youth live in either a home or dorm-type setting. There is on-site staff support around the clock, and residents' whereabouts are monitored. Intensive case management is a central component, as well as participation in education, employment, and life skills development. Youth are required to hold employment and 30% of their income is paid as rent, which is put into an interest-bearing savings account for the youth (this is not required in the underage program for youth 15-17). Upon exit from the program, youth are able to utilize these savings for their security deposit and move-in costs. Another focus is on community participation, both within and outside of the program, and increasing independent access to community resources. Youth in congregate housing need on-site support to assist in their transition but the expectation is that they will be able to live independently upon completion of the program.

*Community-based Housing.* Larkin Street provides two types of community-based housing, scattered site and co-located. In the scattered-site model youth are housed in individual apartments located in various building, in the co-located model housing is provided in multiple units located in one building. Youth in co-located housing programs have access to a higher amount of peer support because they all live in the same building. Community-based housing provides a reduced level of staff supervision and greater opportunity for youth to practice independent living within a supportive safety net. Youth receive intensive case management services and access to support services while living on their own. Case managers meet with youth as often as needed (one to five times per week) in order to support them in maintaining housing and gaining a greater level of independence.

Larkin Street holds the master lease on the apartments and provides a rent subsidy to youth. Youth are required to pay a portion of their income as rent which is put into an interest-bearing savings account for the youth. In scattered site housing the amount is 30% initially and over time the percentage of rent is increased (and the subsidy decreased) to a level as close as possible to the market value of the apartment. In co-located housing youth pay 50% of their income in rent. For youth who are unable to work, rent may be paid through GA or SSI. The focus of the program is on employment, education, and the development of life skills. For youth with more acute behavioral health issues there is also the expectation

### **Spotlight on the LOFT**

The LOFT is a 9-bed congregate transitional living program designed to meet the unique needs of homeless and runaway youth ages 15-17. Youth may be part of the child welfare or juvenile justice system, or unable to live with their families. The program is in an old Victorian and designed to feel as home-like as possible. There is a strong emphasis on preparing youth to live more independently after leaving the program.

Last year the LOFT served 21 youth and the average program length was a little more than one year. Half of the youth served at the LOFT were Latino/a, and 43% were born outside of the United States. Among youth who exited the program 90% transitioned into a stable living situation.

that youth are involved in treatment and connection to community behavioral health treatment providers is important. Youth negotiate real life situations and consequences with guidance from staff members and the safety net of being part of a program. For those who are unable to transition to independence, referral and linkage to adult supportive housing programs takes place.

### Permanent Youth Housing

Permanent affordable housing is provided to youth who are in need of longer-term housing support. It provides a high level of independence as well as a safety net. It is important to note that there is still a transitional aspect to permanent youth housing. Unlike adult permanent housing, youth are encouraged to move on from the program. Case management is voluntary therefore the program is most appropriate if case management support is not essential to youth's overall functioning.

### Population Specific Housing

The agency also provides population specific housing. These are groups that have specific program needs based on presenting issues and/or path to homelessness.

*Foster Care Youth.* Larkin Street has two programs that specifically serve former foster care youth. The initial program was developed due to the large number of former foster youth who were entering the agency's emergency shelter. Many of these youth were dropped at the shelter with garbage bags of their belongings by their foster parents because they were emancipating and had nowhere else to go. Almost half of the youth served by Larkin Street have spent time in the foster care system. The program serves both emancipating foster care youth, effectively catching them before they fall through the cracks and become homeless, as well as former foster care youth who become homeless after leaving the system. The provision of housing is integral to assisting foster care youth in the transition to independence.

*Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning Youth.* LGBTQ youth are overrepresented among the homeless youth population and have distinct needs. LGBTQ specific housing provides youth with an opportunity to establish stability in the context of a supportive peer group. It is essential that services are provided in a culturally appropriate way that creates a safe place for youth since many LGBTQ youth have had negative experiences in various settings, from school to foster care to shelters. Larkin Street has one community based housing program designed to meet the needs of LGBTQ youth. In addition to housing the program provides a range of services including case management, access to mental health and substance use treatment, education and employment services, and health care that specifically addresses the needs of the population.

*HIV-Positive Youth.* Larkin Street has two housing programs that address the unique needs of HIV-positive youth through a coordinated service delivery model that provides case management and services to address the medical and behavioral health needs of youth. The Licensed Residential Care Facility provides on-site housing, on-site medical care, and 24-hour staffing. The second program provides scattered site housing, intensive case management, medical care, and support services.

*Youth with Behavioral Health Needs.* Youth with more significant behavioral health needs require a more intensive level of support services to live in the community. Housing programs may be either congregate or scattered-site but should provide a more intense level of case management services as well as provide access to behavioral health services. These services can be provided by the agency or through strategic collaboration with external providers. The program model must take into account that self-sufficiency for these youth may not be complete independence as they may require ongoing support into adulthood. The type of support can vary from accessing benefits for individuals unable to work due to their disability to adult supportive housing. Larkin Street has one scattered site housing program for youth with behavioral health issues.

### **Housing Program Results:**

- 70% of youth served in emergency housing programs exited to a positive living situation
- 80% of youth served in transitional housing programs exited to a stable living situation
- 100% of youth served in permanent youth housing exited to a stable living situation

## **Larkin Street's Philosophy of Care**

### Low Threshold to Entry

Larkin Street has a commitment to reducing barriers to housing for youth and to work with individuals to obtain and maintain housing regardless of their level of need. The focus is on meeting youth where they're at. For example none of Larkin Street's housing programs require youth to be employed or clean and sober prior to accessing services. After youth have entered the program varying levels of staff support and services are provided in order to meet the individualized needs of youth who present with a range of complex issues.

### Youth Development Approach

It is important to provide services that are responsive to the unique needs of youth at various developmental stages. Services are provided within a youth development approach, working from a strengths-based rather than a deficits-based framework to build skills that support self-sufficiency. Components of a youth development approach include competencies development, opportunities for youth to contribute to their well-being, and positive relationship building. This increases each youth's chance for a successful transition.

### **Spotlight on the Lark Inn**

The Lark Inn is a 40-bed emergency housing program for homeless youth ages 18-24. Youth have access to additional Larkin Street services including case management, health care, and job training. The Lark Inn is designed to meet the specific developmental needs of young people transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. Staff members balance compassion and accountability to develop trusting relationships with youth while encouraging them to reach their full potential.

Last year Lark Inn provided 12,465 nights off the street to 354 youth. Seventeen percent of those youth were homeless by the age of 18, an additional 34% before the age of 21. During the 30-days prior to entering the Lark Inn 28% of youth were living on the street and 11% in a shelter. On average youth spent 35 days in the program. Seventy-percent of youth transitioned from the program into a positive living situation at exit.

## Support Services

A range of support services are needed to address issues that are barriers to self-sufficiency. Support services include education, employment, medical, and behavioral health services. Educational services should include tutoring, GED assistance, adult basic education, and college counseling. Employment services should include job readiness services, workforce placement, and career development services. Behavioral health services are important because mental health issues, substance use, or a combination of both create additional barriers to exiting street life and making successful transitions to independence. Case Management assists youth to develop both short- and long-term goals, as well as to set a plan to reach them. Case Managers help youth to navigate systems to access the services and supports they need in order to reach their goals.

### Focus on Life Skills

Unlike homeless adults, who generally possess the core skill set needed to maintain housing despite the crisis that led to their homelessness, homeless youth have not developed independent living skills. Development of life skills is important for homeless youth and should be included in housing programs, particularly transitional housing programs. Life skills should include both hard and soft skills development such as opening and maintaining a bank account, budgeting, conducting a housing search, landlord relationships, neighbor relations, cooking, grocery shopping, paying household bills, and household maintenance.

### Harm Reduction

Larkin Street services are provided within the context of a harm reduction approach. Harm reduction is a client centered approach that addresses where the youth is in terms of desire to change behavior. Inherent in the approach is the acknowledgment that youth engage in high-risk behaviors. Rather than requiring that they quit participating in these behaviors to receive services, staff members instead work with youth to minimize the harmful effects. Youth are empowered to share information with peers and support each other in a non-judgmental way.

## Policy Recommendations

The housing available for homeless youth is insufficient to meet the demand. There is an estimated 1.8-2.1 million homeless youth, ages 12-24, in the United States. The Family and Youth Services Bureau of the Department of Health and Human Services administers the main federal program dedicated to youth housing and homelessness, the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act. While the program has demonstrated success it is limited in scope and capacity. In fiscal year 2008 the Basic Center program, which provides emergency housing for youth under the age of 18, served 42,167 youth. The Transitional Living Program, which serves youth 16-21, served only 3,554 youth.<sup>2</sup> This does not come close to reaching the estimated need at the national level. The National Alliance to End Homelessness has recently called for the creation of 50,000 new housing opportunities for homeless street youth, a distinct subpopulation of homeless youth, to address this dearth of housing.<sup>3</sup>

This housing insufficiency is mirrored at the local level. Last year Larkin Street served over 3,600 youth through its full range of comprehensive services, approximately 64% of the San Francisco homeless youth population.<sup>4</sup> However, the agency was only able to provide housing to 712 youth. The City of San Francisco recognizes the need for additional housing for this vulnerable population and has committed to increasing the number of housing available to homeless and marginally housed youth.<sup>5</sup>

Youth served through transitional housing programs have better outcomes than youth who only access emergency housing. Transitional housing programs provide youth with a more intensive level of services for a longer period of time, better preparing them for independence upon exit. However there is a shortage of transitional housing available for youth at both the local and the national level.<sup>6</sup> This creates a

bottleneck in the housing continuum from emergency housing to transitional housing because there are not enough program spots available to accommodate youth in emergency housing who need and want transitional housing. Although Larkin Street has expanded its transitional housing capacity in the past few years there are still not enough beds available to meet demand. There were 435 youth served in emergency housing in the last year and only 185 transitional housing program slots.

Ten percent of youth exited one of Larkin Street's emergency housing programs and entered into one of the agency's transitional housing programs. Among youth who stayed in an emergency housing program but did not access transitional housing 54% exited to a stable living situation. The rate of exits from transitional housing to stable living is 80%, which is a 48% improvement over the rate for youth who only accessed emergency housing. It is clear that the key to improving the outcomes for homeless youth is to increase the number of transitional housing beds that are available.

## Conclusion

A range of housing options are necessary to meet the diverse needs of homeless youth and give stability to their lives. Housing should be developmentally appropriate and provide a range of support services that will help youth to move beyond the streets. There should be minimal barriers for youth to enter housing and individualized case planning to address each youth's unique needs is essential. Transitional housing programs, which provide a more intensive level of services for an extended period of time, provide the greatest opportunity for youth to become independent, self-sufficient adults. Providing housing now will prevent youth from cycling through emergency services and becoming the next generation of chronically homeless adults.

## References

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- 5 Mayor's Transitional Youth Task Force. (2007). *Disconnected youth in San Francisco: A roadmap to improve the life chances of San Francisco's most vulnerable young adults*. San Francisco.
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Since 1984, Larkin Street Youth Services has been committed to helping San Francisco's most vulnerable youth ages 12-24 move beyond street life. This commitment has fueled the development of a comprehensive continuum of services that is nationally recognized as a model of innovative and effective care. We offer stability, safety and the opportunity for a better life.

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