

FOCUSING on OUTCOMES for YOUTH



ADMINISTRATION FOR
CHILDREN & FAMILIES



Family and Youth
Services Bureau

Introduction

If you work with young people in crisis and their families, you know that far too many young people run away, are asked to leave home or become homeless. Each year, as many as 550,000 youth are homeless for more than a week according to estimates by the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

You also know that on the street, young people are exposed to all kinds of dangers.

And whether you work with youth on the street, in an emergency shelter or in a transitional living program, you know from experience that young people need a lot of support and guidance to reach their goals.

FOUR INGREDIENTS EVERY YOUTH NEEDS

Based on four decades of work with runaway and homeless youth and the best emerging evidence about what youth need to succeed, FYSB believes the most crucial outcomes for youth served by runaway and homeless youth programs include **safety, well-being, permanent connections** and **self-sufficiency**.

“Focusing on Outcomes for Youth” aims to help you get young people to those outcomes. It describes the practical steps a number of community-based organizations have taken to

- Keep young people safe
- Improve their social and emotional well-being
- Help them develop permanent connections to supportive adults
- Build their self-sufficiency

We hope these stories will serve as a starting point for you in your own work with young people experiencing or at risk for homelessness.



Focusing on Outcomes for Youth: Well-Being

We define **well-being** as: Youth enjoy general good health and have access to treatment and care when they need it. Beyond physical health, they have satisfactory life circumstances such as stable living arrangements, enriching educational experiences, job satisfaction, mental health stability and social connectedness.

We define **permanent connections** as: Youth have a stable living situation that they do not fear losing or having to leave. They have solid, healthy relationships and connections with family (whether biological or not), friends, mentors and other significant people to whom they can turn in good times and bad.

We define **safety** as: Youth are able to live free from violence, abuse, neglect, harassment, stalking, exploitation and fear. This sense of safety is physical, emotional and mental. Youth feel supported and protected from harm in relationships and in social settings.

We define **self-sufficiency** as: Youth have the skills, or are learning the skills, to live independently, support and take care of themselves, get and stay employed, manage their finances, further their education, support and take care of a family (now or in the future), contribute to their communities and plan for the future.



WELL-BEING

In this section we'll focus on ways to achieve and improve well-being for runaway and homeless youth. We talk to one organization that breaks down barriers to get youth off the street and into a safe shelter—even for one night—as a first step in improving well-being. We also hear first-hand how a one-stop-shop health clinic for homeless youth helps young people stay connected and take care of their physical and mental health. And we look at how making art can contribute to young people's overall sense of well-being.

Low-threshold Shelters: A First Step Toward Improving Well-being

It's 8:45 p.m. in the Lakeview neighborhood of Chicago, and two dozen youth have gathered for the nightly lottery to get a bed at The Crib, a shelter that serves homeless young people.

The Crib is a "low threshold" shelter, which means it doesn't require referrals or identification to stay there, and it has few rules for its residents. Open from 9 p.m. to 9 a.m. to people between 18 and 24 years old, the 20-bed shelter operates at capacity, having to turn away youth every night.

Though they might not know it, the young people on queue are waiting for more than a clean place to sleep and get a hot meal. By making it easy for youth to enter and receive services, low-threshold shelters like The Crib offer more than the basics. Their supporters, including Jennifer Ho, deputy director at the federal government's United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, say these shelters can help youth take a first step toward enhanced well-being, laying a foundation on which they can build.

"Low-threshold shelters offer things that youth can say 'yes' to," Ho says. Things like a less-structured approach, positive interactions with caring adults, and links to other services as youth—who often have profound needs—are ready to accept them.

In Chicago, Youth Advocacy, Collaboration and Volunteer Efforts Result in The Crib

After attending an art and talent show produced by a group of homeless youth in Chicago, then-Mayor Richard Daley was so impressed, he accepted the young people's invitation to talk about issues affecting homeless youth in the city, and the need for more overnight shelters.

As a result of that conversation, the mayor formed a task force on homeless youth. One year later, The Crib, a 20-bed, low-threshold shelter, opened its doors for a 4-month trial period with a grant from the city of Chicago.

The Crib is a collaborative effort involving many agencies and volunteers. Lakeview Lutheran Church houses the shelter, the Night Ministry staffs the shelter, and First Slice Café uses profits from its restaurant to serve breakfast, lunch and dinner on weekdays. The church and other volunteer groups provide meals on weekends.

In its first month, The Crib provided a safe place to sleep to 59 young people and turned away 141 due to lack of space. Realizing that the low-threshold shelter was filling an important need, the city extended its funding for a full year.

"Having a safe place where homeless youth can go to spend the night and get out of danger is extremely important," says Jennifer Ho, former deputy director at the federal government's United States Interagency Council on Homelessness.

▶ STARTING WITH THE BASICS

A good night's sleep can make a world of difference. Paul Hamann, president of The Night Ministry, which runs The Crib, hears from youth service providers at other Chicago organizations that the shelter helps young people follow through with their case plans. When a youth sits down with a case manager or a counselor, and he slept on the street the night before, he's not going to be able to participate fully in that session.

But when youth are well-rested and well-fed (the shelter also provides bagged lunches that youth can take with them in the morning), they're less anxious and better able to focus on their goals.

▶ A LESS STRUCTURED APPROACH

"Most homeless youth can't go from the street to a highly structured setting with the flip of a switch," says Hamann.

Some homeless youth simply reject the rules and requirements of traditional group shelter programs. Others are unable to access them because entry requirements—like being able to follow through with a case management plan—seem unfeasible, especially to those with overwhelming mental health or substance abuse issues.

The Crib focuses on moving young people off the streets. It provides access to knowledgeable and caring adults, a sense of stability and some degree of structure with regular schedules and chores. The idea is to help young people improve their well-being by preparing them to be helped first.

"We provide as much structure as possible while also realizing that too much can be a challenge for some youth," Hamann says. The Crib provides these youth a place to sleep, shower, get a hot meal, do laundry and talk to someone who can help.

▶ A RANGE OF OPPORTUNITIES

The low-threshold model provides a number of opportunities to help youth move toward well-being and more permanent housing, Hamann says.

Dinners are served family-style and youth often spend time, after dinner and before bed, sitting at the tables talking with each other and with staff about their day. Youth play board games, draw, journal and participate in group discussions or activities, like yoga. Some youth are in school, Hamann says, and the shelter gives them a quiet space to do homework.

"They have social connectedness here, with staff and other youth. And while it may not be permanent, youth begin to see that those permanent connections are possible," says Hamann.

Staff also provide referrals to other services in the community, like health care and mental health and substance abuse counseling.

Their positive interactions with The Crib staff and the chance to see what's possible help youth prepare to accept needed services, Hamann says.

"The Crib acts as a bridge for a lot of youth. They become aware of and gain access to a lot of services that they never knew existed for them," he says. Services that help young people move one step closer toward health, happiness and a sense of well-being.



Answering Questions, Building Trust: The Role of Health Services in Promoting Well-being

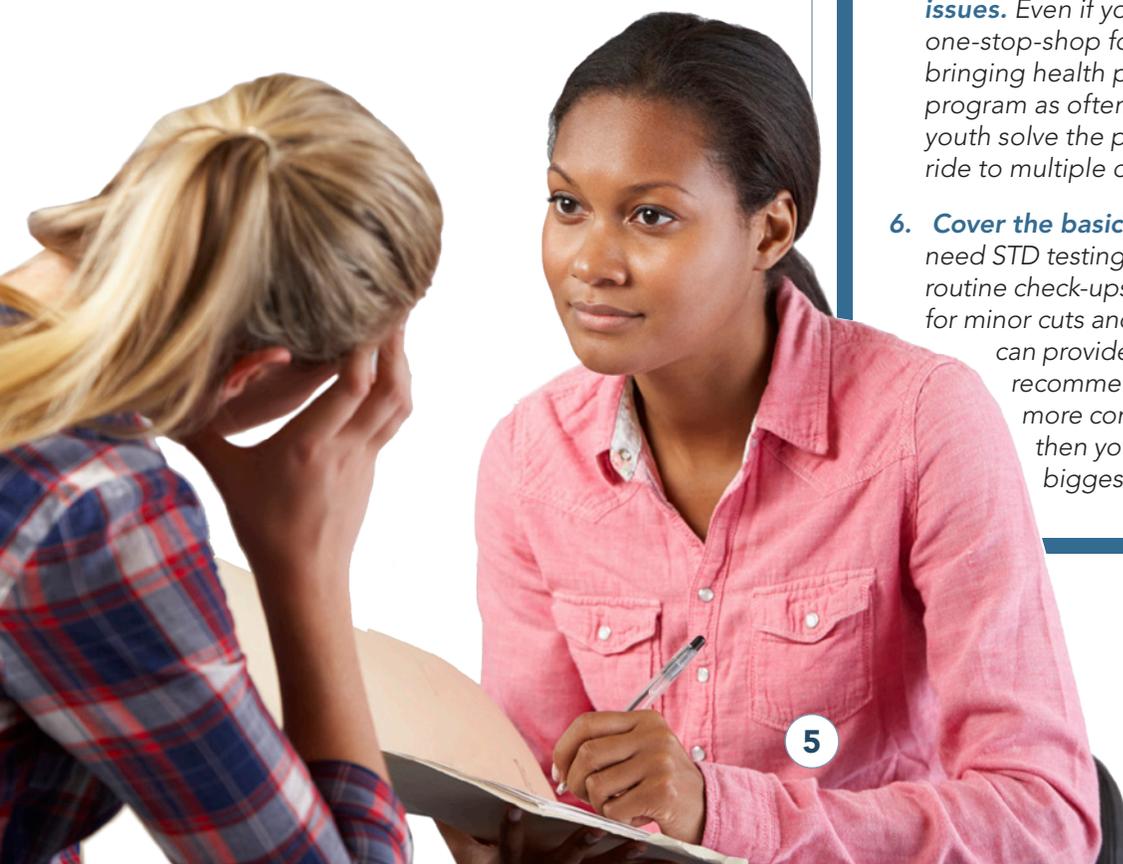
YouthLink, a youth-serving organization in Minneapolis, opened a one-stop-shop health clinic for runaway and homeless youth. Here, Clinical Supervisor Lisa Borneman explains how the facility works and why physical health is essential to young people's well-being.

Our clinic is open Tuesdays and Thursdays, noon to 8 p.m. That overlaps with our drop-in period, which is 3 to 8 p.m. During these hours, youth can talk to a nurse practitioner and a clinic nurse from Health Care for the Homeless. A visiting nurse also comes every Wednesday during drop-in, and we provide dental services once a month where young people can get a cleaning or a tooth pulled.

Our goal is to get them connected to a clinic, because having a primary care doctor who can follow them is the best thing for their health. So many of our youth use the hospital for their primary care, which means there aren't necessarily records following them. But at a clinic, doctors can check their records and notice, "Hey, you've been in here

Top Priorities for Homeless Youth Health Care

- 1. Connect them to a clinic.** *A consistent, helpful doctor can recognize patterns in a youth's health that hospital emergency rooms aren't often able to see.*
- 2. Help them understand their own health.** *If a youth isn't in the habit of going to the doctor, they may not know the basics about their body or its condition. This knowledge is empowering.*
- 3. Give them trauma-informed care.** *When it comes to mental health, homeless youth have experienced and witnessed incredible hardships. Help them keep their anger in context, and appreciate it as a normal, healthy response that doesn't define them.*
- 4. Teach them to trust professionals.** *Very often homeless youth don't go to the doctor because they've learned to mistrust authority figures. Routine, reliable health care workers can help them reestablish a sense of trust.*
- 5. Help them overcome transportation issues.** *Even if you can't supply a one-stop-shop for health care service, bringing health professionals into your program as often as possible can help youth solve the problem of finding a ride to multiple offices.*
- 6. Cover the basics.** *Homeless youth need STD testing, pregnancy testing, routine check-ups and treatment for minor cuts and problems. If you can provide these—and can recommend a clinic that treats more complicated issues—then you've already met their biggest health care needs.*



Focusing on Outcomes for Youth: Well-Being

for upper respiratory things a lot, maybe you have asthma." The hospital won't necessarily know that pattern.

A lot of the girls come through for pregnancy testing. But a lot of them have colds, rolled ankles, just general stuff. We do a lot of STD testing, too. But sometimes it's enough for these young people just to have a medical person to talk to. Whether it's trouble with their menstrual cycles or a recurring pain, a lot of our youth don't really understand how their bodies work. As far as mental health, our youth often come to us for anger management. They've been exploited, abused, they've witnessed abuse. They're having a normal reaction to an abnormal situation, but it confuses them and makes them angry.

Much of the visiting nurse's job is education, just so youth are more aware of the available services. If they need help that goes beyond what our clinic can do, the nurses connect the youth to another clinic with more services. Or if youth come in during off-hours, we can call our nurse practitioner. She can help them find a clinic rather than having to use a hospital.

This relates to well-being because it's relationship-based: We have a regular medical staff now that is so youth-focused. They're always here on the same days, always consistent, so the youth count on that and know they can get these services.

Having a familiar face at the drop-in gives youth a sense of trust and security. Because of the nature of homelessness, they have a lot of mistrust of agencies, services, people in general. We used to have doctors once a week, very short hours. It wasn't great for relationship-building with youth or staff. We have to build relationships first to help them feel ready for services.

Youth walk in to our health center with really varied issues. They say, "My stomach hurts" or "I have asthma." The youth don't always know what they need, so it's our job to explain what's available. And so whoever has the relationship with that youth, the case worker or another staff member will say, "Let me introduce you to this woman in the clinic." Since they trust the services we have here, we can get them to sign up to be seen.

They often come in for one thing, but end up talking about their past. They've been forced to take meds or do counseling when they weren't ready. Our goal is to give them choices and present health services in a positive way. We do groups on healthy relationships, to get them to realize that mental health involves more than sitting around in an office spilling your guts.

Having these services onsite is great because we don't have to refer youth to places that we may not know, or places it might be difficult for them to get to. Often youth won't attend to things because, without good transportation options, it's simply a lot of work. It's nice for them to have it all in one place so they don't have to balance it all themselves.



Art Brings Healing to At-Risk Youth

A brand-new box of pastels. A set of wood-handled paintbrushes. A pad of heavy drawing paper. A tub of clay. A stack of magazines and a pair of scissors.

Jane Tillman, a mental health counselor and art therapist in Seattle, WA, believes that these materials can be as healing as any prescription or therapy session for young people exposed to violence and trauma. To her art supplies, she adds a quiet room, soothing music and a nonjudgmental attitude.

Tillman and others who use art in their work with at-risk youth say it has a profound effect, helping young people heal and gain a sense of well-being when adults – and words – have failed them.

“If they can’t tell you the awful things that have happened, they can at least draw it,” says Micala Gingrich-Gaylord, who directs the expressive arts center at Youthville, a child welfare and mental health services provider in Newton, KS. Plus, she says, “Art is a way to reframe those experiences and imagine something different.”

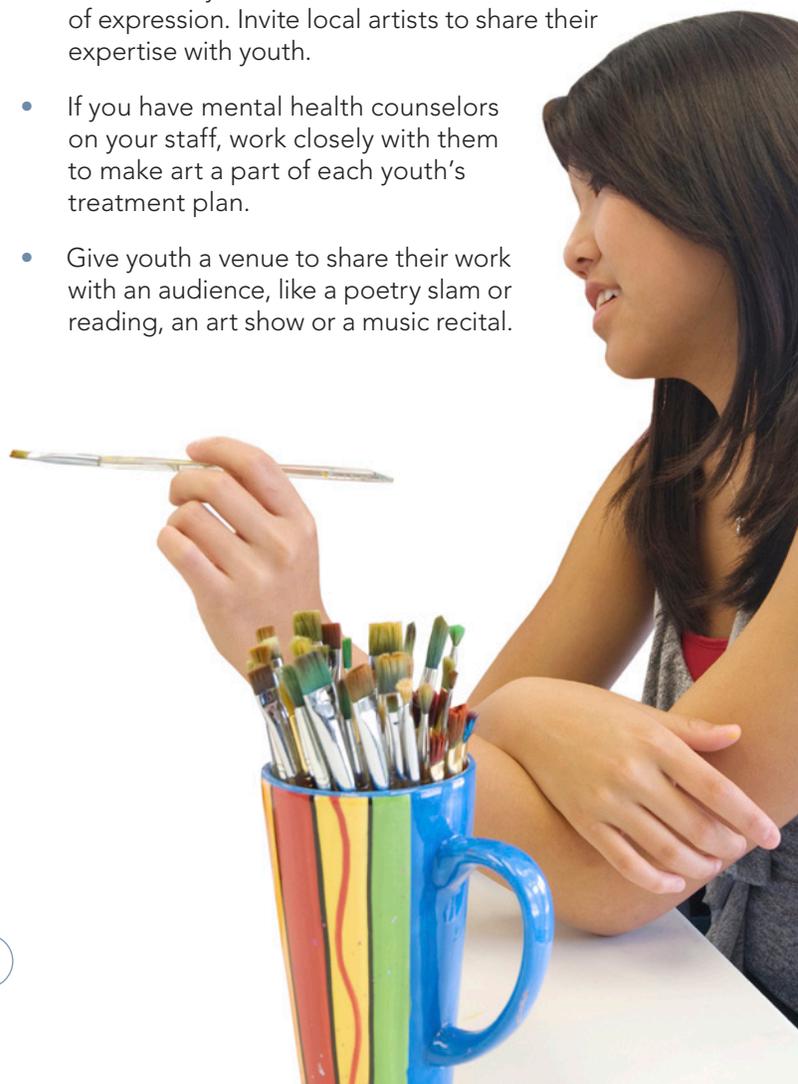
In addition, the sensory experience of making art can help soothe and relax traumatized youth, says Laura Seftel, coordinator of expressive arts therapy at the Northeast Center for Youth and Families. And she says group-made art – from drumming circles to drama – can teach young people a host of social skills, from making eye contact to working in a team, as well as giving them empowering ways to express themselves.

At a poetry slam, a young person can let out anger he’s kept bottled up. At an art exhibit or a chalk art festival, youth find an audience and a place to take a healthy risk.

“For the first time, people aren’t looking at them as kids in trouble,” Gingrich-Gaylord says. “They’re looking at them as artists.”

► TIPS FOR USING ART TO PROMOTE HEALING AND WELL-BEING:

- Use high quality supplies if you can get your hands on them, because having nice paints, brushes and other materials makes youth feel valued. Ask art supply and office supply stores to donate materials. Teach youth to clean paint brushes and store paints and solvents properly.
- If you can’t get nice supplies, that’s OK. Use what you’ve got. Youth can draw using copier paper and ballpoint pens. They can paint a coffee pot or an old chair.
- Work alongside youth, but not in a way that will outshine them or make them feel self-conscious.
- If the youth is willing, talk about what you see in their work – the colors, the shapes, the texture – but don’t interpret or judge.
- Offer a variety of arts: painting, drawing, poetry, fiction, drama, music, dance. Each appeals to different youth and offers a different means of expression. Invite local artists to share their expertise with youth.
- If you have mental health counselors on your staff, work closely with them to make art a part of each youth’s treatment plan.
- Give youth a venue to share their work with an audience, like a poetry slam or reading, an art show or a music recital.



PERMANENT CONNECTIONS

In this section we focus on ways to achieve and improve **permanent connections** for runaway and homeless youth. We talk to one organization that has made permanent connections a fundamental goal in all aspects of its services. We also hear about the benefits and challenges of housing young homeless couples together. And we look at how gender-specific programming can help boys and girls express themselves, build camaraderie, and learn to develop healthy, lasting relationships.



A Youth-serving Agency Makes Permanent Connections Its Central Goal

When Boys & Girls Aid, a 126-year-old youth-serving agency in Portland, OR, put a new strategic plan in place, staff and board members took a hard look at how well the organization was fulfilling its core purpose of improving the lives of children in need.

Throughout the discussions, they struggled with a question, says Vera Stoulil, director of operations: "How do we help youth who can't go back to their families live independently?"

They discussed creating more supportive services for youth who'd left their programs, more follow up and aftercare. But the more they tried to answer the question, the more they realized they were missing the point.

"We realized that if youth were leaving our program and needing us to fall back on, then we'd missed something," Stoulil says. "We need to prepare youth to live independently, but we also need to prepare them to live interdependently. Young people need families and connections in their lives."

Stoulil says coming to that conclusion made sense for an organization that in addition to working with runaway and homeless youth also serves foster youth and provides adoption services—two areas in which practitioners have long thought of a permanent family or home as the ultimate, if not always attainable, goal for young people.

Today, Boys & Girls Aid aims to establish permanent connections for every child and youth that walks in its doors. In other words, the old question has been replaced with a new one, Stoulil says: “No matter what service we’re providing, how does the concept of permanency fit into that service?”

▶ **DISRUPTED ATTACHMENTS**

It may seem obvious that young people need enduring personal connections if they are going to thrive and become successful adults. But applying the principle of permanency to runaway and homeless youth—particularly those who are 18 or older—requires a shift in thinking about what the term looks like in practice, Stoulil and others at the organization say.

Many youth who enter Boys & Girls Aid’s emergency shelter and transitional living program come from families in which unhealthy relationships are the norm, says Andrea Logan Sanders, who oversees the organization’s shelter and housing programs.

“They’ve had disrupted attachments, parents coming and going, substance abuse, mental illness, instability, unpredictability,” she says.

▶ **SPECTRUM OF PERMANENCY**

All of that means that many youth are starting at square one when it comes to having healthy connections. So, when a young person enters the transitional living program at Boys & Girls Aid, staff members assess where they are on the “spectrum of permanency,” asking questions about the number of family and friends they regularly interact with, the depth of the connections, the quality of the connections and the young person’s desire to have permanent relationships.

Based on the results of the assessment, staff members identify the youth’s biggest needs

when it comes to having strong, permanent relationships and create a plan to address these needs throughout the youth’s time in the program. For some youth, that may lead to returning to live with their families, but many others are better served by simply repairing relationships and staying connected.

“We’re acknowledging that their families may not be the best resource for them, but they can still have a healthy relationship with them,” Logan Sanders says. “Sometimes it’s easier to communicate or learn how to communicate without the pressures of living together.”

The overarching goal for each young person in the runaway and homeless youth programs is to have at least one caring adult they can call if they need help or want to share good news, and for them to also have the lifelong ability to make, and keep, new friends.

▶ **PREPARING TO CONNECT**

Crystal Wilkes, a mental health therapist at Boys & Girls Aid, says the organization’s new focus on permanency gives staff a common language and focus. “Now that there’s a word and a philosophy placed on it, it can inform the therapy,” she says.

Staff of the transitional living program stress the elements of healthy relationships in life skills sessions and their one-on-one interactions with youth. That emphasis, Logan Sanders says, helps the organization move young people closer to meeting the other goals of the transitional living program, like education, employment training and skills building.

“None of those things really stick unless they have a strong sense of self and that doesn’t happen unless they have a strong base of friends,” she says.

Staff at Boys & Girls Aid say that watching youth learn how to make friends, meet people with similar interests, resolve conflicts, and generally improve their relationship skills has solidified the organization’s commitment to permanent connections.

“I haven’t met one client who doesn’t want to have strong connections with other people,” Wilkes says.

Housing Young Families Together to Promote Permanent Connections

Ten years ago, when homeless teen couples arrived at the doors of Our Family Services, babies in arms and in search of housing, staff of the Tucson, AZ, human services agency were forced to keep them apart. The organization had a policy of housing girls and boys separately.

Many couples refused to split up. Some stayed together on the street or couch surfed. A few had partners sneak in past curfew.

Not comfortable with any of these scenarios, Our Family Services established a program where young parents could live together with their children. The program offers intensive case management, counseling, and life skills and parenting education for up to eight families: 16 young adult clients, ages 18 to 21, and their children.

Our Family Services is one of a few programs for runaway and homeless youth that allow young couples, with or without children, to live together. The policy runs counter to standard practice at most organizations, which typically house young people according to gender and have rules against partners living together. Proponents of the live-together approach say the benefits of such arrangements, including increased commitment to the program, a built-in support system, and a greater likelihood that couples will stay together after they leave, outweigh the challenges and dramas that can go along with young adult relationships.

"It's not right for all couples," says Ricardo Fernandez, who runs the Teens in Transition program at Our Family Services, "but for some committed young people, we can help promote a permanent connection."

► IN IT FOR THE LONG HAUL

At Community Action Partnership in Western Nebraska, couples need not have a child together to live together and be considered a family, says Vicky Lawton, director of youth

programs. "So many of our youth come in saying, 'I have no one,'" she says. "We think the best way to help youth develop a support system is to build on an existing relationship and help it succeed."

That success depends on staff nurturing the relationship and paying careful attention to make sure the young people's bond is healthy and strong. And to do that, adult staff members might have to ditch some preconceived notions about young adult relationships, chief among them the idea that young love is not serious and is unlikely to last.

In fact, youth in committed relationships tend to be more mature and grounded than most youth who aren't in a long-term relationship, Fernandez says. He sees young couples provide each other social and emotional support and pool their resources for daily living.

And allowing youth to live together may make their relationships more long lasting: Both Fernandez and Lawton say that couples who live together tend to stay together. Fernandez says that 80 percent of couples housed together at Our Family Services stay together for at least six months after exiting the program. (That's when staff typically follow up with them.) Lawton sees similar patterns at her program. "They may have rough, rocky times, but most of the time, they end up staying together," she says.

Still, young adult relationships can involve a lot of drama, Lawton says. And while most difficulties can be addressed with counseling and mediation, Lawton concedes that working with couples takes more planning, involves more work, and requires more training. In Lawton's and Fernandez's programs,



Making Connections

The majority of young people who seek help at homeless youth shelters come alone, and most have trouble identifying even one person they could turn to in good times and bad.

Ricardo Fernandez from Our Family Services in Arizona and Vicky Lawton from Community Action Partnership of Western Nebraska describe how to help all youth foster permanent connections:

Lawton: "We do an eco-map with every young person, and we literally diagram a support network. We help identify who are the "forever people" in the young person's life—family and friends who will be there no matter what. Then, who are others in the community they can turn to in case of an emergency. We don't just put it on paper. We help the young person reach out to those people and build relationships."

Fernandez: "If a young person really can't identify one person to be that permanent connection, we ask, 'Who would you like it to be?' and we go from there. We teach them about healthy relationships and through counseling address any particular issues that have caused problems in past relationships. Sometimes kids don't want anything to do with their families, so we help them cultivate other sources of support."

counselors, or coaches, help couples work together as a team and improve their relationships. Lawton advises finding a counselor with expertise in family therapy who can help young people work on individual issues as well as issues related to family dynamics.

► FINDING STRENGTH IN THE RELATIONSHIP

To those who worry that cohabitating young couples might encourage reckless behavior in each other, like using drugs or having unprotected

sex, Fernandez points out that peer pressure can be a powerful, constructive influence. He often sees partners support positive behavior and motivate each other to work on goals, like the time a young woman helped her boyfriend quit using drugs.

There have been times when one partner is doing something illegal or unsafe, but "on the whole," Fernandez says, "it's just easier for them to have someone they can rely on, and the strengths of the relationship outweigh the challenges."

And while some research has found that parenting youth who live together are more likely to have additional children, Fernandez says that at Our Family Services rates of second pregnancy among young women who live with their partners are not significantly different from youth housed singly.



▶ MANAGING BREAKUPS

As hard as staff work to support young people, sometimes a breakup is unavoidable. But if a relationship does go south, Lawton says that helping to manage the breakup is just as important as helping young people stay together.

Both programs maintain individual files for each young person, so they can continue to provide separate housing and support to each partner. "Even in the worst case scenario," Lawton says, "where abuse is involved, you can't simply say, 'Oh, I'm glad that person is gone.' We don't ever just drop anyone from receiving care and services."

Improving Selves, Improving Relationships Through Gender-Specific Programming

"David" was a gang member, quiet and surly, when he arrived at his first group meeting with The Council for Boys and Young Men in Cotati, CA. But Juan Gomez, a trainer for the council, was used to boys who thought aggression was the best way to relate to their peers. Gomez took David aside and tried to help him construct a new self-image: "I see leadership in you," Gomez said.

Before long, David was trying to live up to his new identity. He began taking notes, showing up early to meetings, and talking more. "His manners improved and he was more engaged," Gomez says. Over time, David's ability to engage with Gomez and the other young men in the group more positively seems to have helped him in the outside world. He enrolled in community college and got a part-time job.

Many young people come from environments where there is no model for healthy, respectful interactions. As a result, these young people struggle to connect with the people they most need to help them make and maintain good choices. That's where programs like the council, and its sister organization, Girls Circle, come in. These groups provide a safe and supportive space for young people to express their real feelings, get affirmation from their peers and begin to build more positive relationships.

Beth Hossfeld, who co-founded Girls Circle in Northern California in 1994 and the Council for Boys and Young Men in 2008, says her programs are based in relational-cultural theory, which claims that individual well-being is dependent on healthy relationships with larger groups. The theory has been used in therapies for all ages, but Hossfeld says there are specific benefits for young people.

Girls Circle is recognized as a "promising approach" by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention for its ability to improve girls' self-efficacy, body image and social connection. Research has found that girls in the program are much more able to find things in common with others, tell adults what they need, and pick friends that treat them the way they want to be treated. The much newer Boys Council is currently being evaluated.



The curriculum has been used for youth in shelters, after-school clubs, and church and community groups. Hossfeld says, “We focus on strengths and the core skills you need in relationships—respect for yourself and for your partner.”

► FOSTERING SELF-ESTEEM IN GIRLS

In the Girls Circle and Council for Boys and Young Men model, six to 10 young people meet for 10 weekly 2-hour sessions. The adult facilitator doesn’t lecture or even lead the conversation. Instead, they introduce a theme at each meeting and a creative activity meant to elicit opinions and discussion from the youth.

According to Hossfeld, girls are typically more comfortable with self-expression, so Girls Circle allows them to role-play, write in their journals, and participate in other activities that foster a sense of self and help build trust among the participants.

Girls “want so much to stay connected to peers and their romantic partners that they will often sacrifice their real feelings,” Hossfeld says. The Girls Circle curriculum helps young women realize that their most meaningful relationships occur when they feel comfortable enough to be themselves around other people.

The girls’ discussion topics are meant to increase self-esteem. One week focuses on trust, so that girls learn what trust means in a relationship. Another week concentrates on self-confidence and helps girls overcome the common feeling that they need other people’s approval to be successful. Other topics include friendship, body image and personal goals.

► HELPING BOYS OVERCOME STEREOTYPES

Hossfeld says that most boys respond to more structured activities with clear expectations. Rather than journaling or role playing, Boys Council meetings include games and sports that give boys a different way of establishing trust with one another.

Many of the young men in Juan Gomez’s groups have absent fathers or no male family presence at all. The boys’ conversations address young men’s lack of role models and their need for acceptance. The forum provides an accepting

space to discuss their feelings, a luxury for boys who aren’t used to showing emotions in public.

Gomez remembers one boy who invited his father to a meeting so he could explain that he missed him when he traveled for work. “His father had no idea,” says Gomez, “but they were able to talk about that because of our judgment-free zone. They might never have talked that way at home.”

At home, stereotypes of what’s manly typically dominate. “Their idea of masculinity is money, power and control,” says Gomez. “That’s a rap video. We introduce ideas about manhood that aren’t meant to be tough.”

They also discuss girls as partners and friends, not just potential hookups. All these conversations lay the groundwork for boys to build healthy, enduring connections with both men and women.



SAFETY

In this section, we focus on ways to achieve and improve safety for runaway and homeless youth. First, we look at runaway prevention practices, meant to keep youth off the street and in their homes whenever possible. Next, we address the particular safety needs of sexually trafficked youth while they are getting help from social service providers. And last, we look at best practices for keeping youth safe after they leave a runaway and homeless youth program.

Runaway Prevention: Helping Young People Stay Safe at Home

Nicole West was teaching her weekly “Responsive Attentive Peers” life skills class at a school for at-risk students in Sherman, TX, and one student had all the warning signs of running away. She was 17, toying with joining a gang, and it seemed unlikely she’d ever be able to return to traditional school. She fought with her mother and resisted everything West tried to teach her about ignoring peer pressure and communicating with her family in a healthy way.

“She was at that point where she just didn’t care about anything,” says West, a prevention specialist at North Texas Youth Connection. “But she kept coming. And I could tell she was starting to pick up on the lessons. Towards the end she told me that she was applying the things we were talking about. Soon she came in and said ‘I got a job.’”

Under West’s gentle guidance, the young woman entered a new phase: a year later, the young woman has gone back to traditional public school and avoided joining the gang. Perhaps most important, she’s getting along much better with her mother.

Every youth worker knows the importance of helping runaway and homeless teens, but the primary line of defense is preventing young people from running away in the first place. By helping at-risk young people improve their coping and communication skills—and by extension, their home lives—and recognize the risks of street life, youth workers can prevent them from becoming statistics.

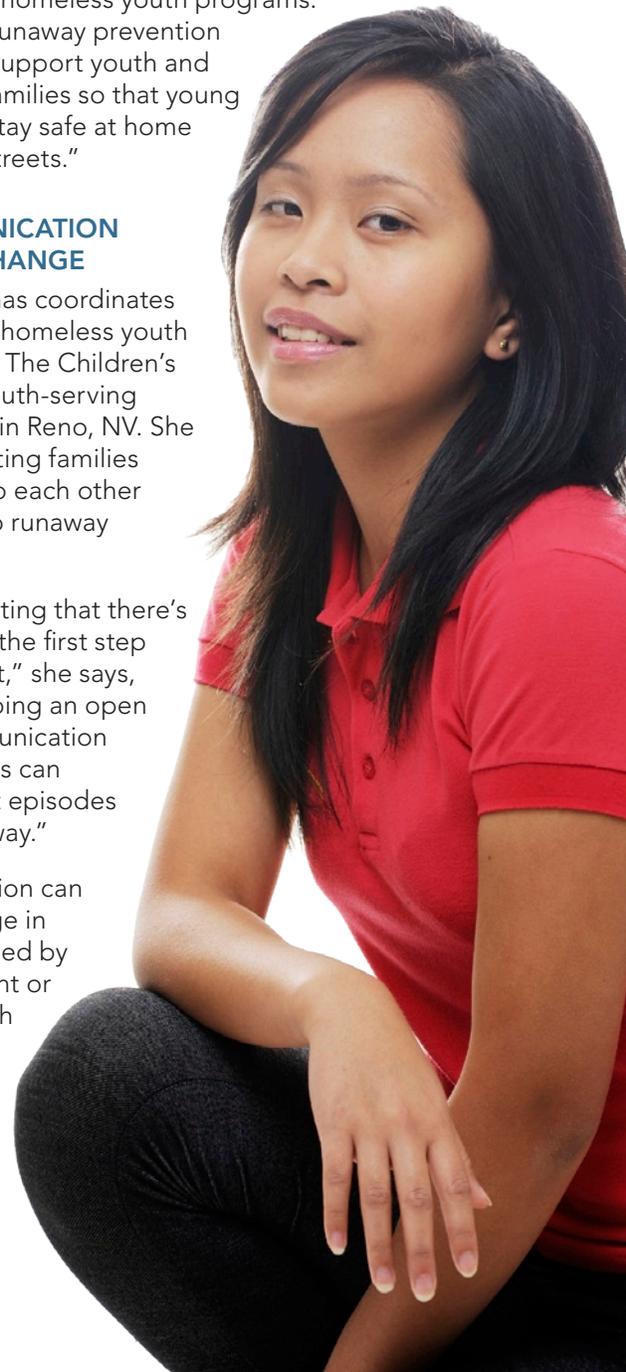
This undertaking lies at the heart of the Family and Youth Services Bureau’s mission. “In the continuum of services that Family and Youth Services Bureau grantees offer to runaway and homeless youth and their families, prevention is essential,” says Curtis O. Porter, of FYSB’s runaway and homeless youth programs. “Successful runaway prevention efforts help support youth and strengthen families so that young people can stay safe at home and off the streets.”

► COMMUNICATION SPURS CHANGE

Norma Thomas coordinates runaway and homeless youth programs for The Children’s Cabinet, a youth-serving organization in Reno, NV. She says that getting families to open up to each other is essential to runaway prevention.

“Communicating that there’s a problem is the first step in changing it,” she says, “and developing an open line of communication within families can prevent most episodes of running away.”

Communication can be a challenge in families headed by a single parent or those in which parents work



long hours to make ends meet. When West asks young people to draw a picture of their family at home after dinner time, she says “There might be one or two kids out of 25 who draw everyone together in the living room, but most draw each person in the house in different rooms,” she says.

West uses the drawings as a visual aid to encourage youth to tell their parents what they need from them. “We tell [youth], ‘Parents can’t read minds. Spend time with your family and let them know what you’re thinking and how you’re feeling,’” she says.

In addition to her classroom lessons, West offers counseling sessions to youth and families meant to foster more open communication. In particular, she teaches families the importance of body language and tone of voice, which can often communicate more than words do.

Anger-management lessons can also help youth to express themselves better to parents without instigating a fight. West asks youth to calm down, count to ten, and talk respectfully when they feel victimized or unheard.

“We talk about how every family is unique, how each person has a different role to play and how we all need to take some responsibility in the family,” she adds. By giving youth a sense that their actions matter to the general well-being of the family, West challenges them to improve the family dynamic rather than run away from it.

In cases where youth claim to be experiencing abuse or neglect at home, however, West steps in to connect them to the many local services that can keep them from ending up on the street.

▶ RUNAWAY REALITY

Thomas says that many young people only see what they’re running away from, not where they’re going.

“A lot of kids have glamorized notions of what it would be like to leave home and live on their own,” she says. “We try to start a dialogue about what running away really means day-to-day.”

In group discussion sessions, she asks young people what they think they’d need to take with them if they left home today, how it would feel



Let's Talk

Nicole West, prevention specialist for the North Texas Youth Connection, and Norma Thomas, runaway and homeless youth services coordinator for The Children's Cabinet, both rely on the Let's Talk Runaway Prevention Curriculum, an interactive program intended to build life skills, educate youth about alternatives to running away, and encourage youth to seek help when they need it.

The Let's Talk curriculum was developed by the National Runaway Safeline, a Family and Youth Services Bureau grantee, and was recently deemed an evidence-based intervention. Researchers tested the curriculum in 10 communities in eight states. They found that Let's Talk improved young people's ability to deal with challenging life situations and overcome obstacles in a healthy way.

West, who has taught the curriculum for five years, says that youth learn different skills in each of the curriculum's 14 modules—everything from self-advocacy to anger management and respectful body language. "They learn to cope with different issues that come up so that they can manage stressors in their lives and choose not to run away from them," she says.

By helping youth feel respected and valued at home, the Let's Talk curriculum addresses the issues that often precede running away.

not having a change of clothes or not knowing where they were going to sleep that night.

"We often hear, 'I'd rather be living with my boyfriend or girlfriend on the street,'" says Nicole West. "Many of these youth have serious problems at home, but there are also a lot of kids who just don't like the chores, don't like their parents' rules. They think, 'I'll have nobody to tell me what to do, it'll be so easy.' We try and teach those kids it's not like they think it will be."

West uses statistics about homelessness in and around Sherman to convey the difficulties of living on the street. She asks youth how many shelters they think are available in surrounding areas. And she brings in people who work with homeless youth to share stories of their clients' lives.

Of course, the point of runaway prevention efforts is not to make running away seem like an even bleaker prospect than staying at home. The goal is to help young people and families develop more nurturing, healthy relationships—and in turn, to prevent today's troubled youth from turning into tomorrow's street outreach client.



Creating a Safe Place for Trafficked Youth in Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs

The girls sit on the floor and on the sofa. They listen and share. Sometimes, it's hard to talk. But in this space, no one is judged.

This is Rachel's Group. Once a week, Rachel Lloyd meets with members of Girls Educational and Mentoring Services, the New York organization she founded to help young women leave "the Life," as sex trafficking is called by those involved with it.

When they're in Rachel's Group, the girls feel safe—empowered, listened to, sheltered from the brutality of their lives and the stigma that the outside world places on them. Like the girls she mentors, Lloyd was trafficked for sex as a young woman. She knows firsthand the manipulation, degradation and rape the girls face. She knows the danger inherent in trying to leave the Life, and the strength it takes for girls to break the exploitative bonds that tie them to their pimps. She knows the girls won't come here for help if they feel endangered.

"The girls say, 'We like being here because it's safe and because it's a community,'" says Julie Laurence, chief program officer at GEMS.

Survivor-led programs like GEMS have emerged as models for other youth-serving organizations that come into contact with trafficked youth, but aren't sure how to ensure their physical and emotional safety. Experts say that with some precautions and training, runaway and homeless youth programs, with their dual focus on understanding and treating young people's trauma and on empowering youth to reach their full potential, can create their own version of Rachel's Group: a safe, nonjudgmental environment where formerly trafficked youth feel comfortable getting help.

"It's about having rapport and establishing a context of safety and non-exploitation," says Mary Schmidbauer, director of Second Chance, a Toledo, OH, program that works with trafficked women and girls.

▶ KEEPING DANGER AT BAY

Physical safety is paramount for trafficked youth, who have an extra level of safety concerns above and beyond those of other runaway and homeless youth, Laurence says.

"Pimps use violence and threats of harming their families if young people try to escape," she says. And often traffickers know each other, so young people might fear that their attempts to leave the Life might reach the wrong ears.

Runaway and homeless youth programs also have to be vigilant to ensure that pimps don't try to recruit vulnerable young people from emergency shelters, and that trafficked youth don't attempt to recruit others while they are in a program.

To address those safety concerns, Schmidbauer says programs that serve trafficked youth shouldn't open up near prostitution zones.



Second Chance is tucked away on a church campus, but it's in the center of town and on a bus line. Girls can easily get there without being observed or followed by pimps.

At GEMS, a security camera monitors the locked outside doors, and all visitors have to be buzzed in.

If trafficking does occur near a youth shelter or program, or if pimps attempt to harass or recruit youth entering or leaving the facilities, the best remedy is to work closely with law enforcement, says Jake Hardie, special agent with the FBI and coordinator of the Northwest Ohio Violent Crimes Against Children Task Force.

"What helps is if the staff at these shelters relay information to law enforcement that helps us build a baseline of what's going on with trafficking in the area," he says. "Just by giving us that type of information, that helps us deal with the problem."

Schmidbauer and her staff keep an eye out for youth who seem interested in recruiting their peers. Often these girls are overconfident and act over-sexualized, Schmidbauer says, unlike many typical victims, who often are unassertive and unassuming and won't make eye contact. Schmidbauer assigns a staff member to shadow the suspected recruiter and be in the room with her at all times (short of following her to the bathroom) as long as she is at Second Chance, to keep her from recruiting other youth.

▶ FEELING SAFE

Experts say ensuring safety for trafficked youth is not just about physical safety from exploiters and johns. It's also about making youth who've been used and abused by adults feel safe, as the girls in Rachel's group do, and making them feel that staff won't harm or manipulate them.

"It's important for these girls to see that there's someone who's there just to help them and doesn't want anything in return," says Jennifer Meyers, an FBI victim specialist in Cleveland.

For a youth-serving program to feel safe, staff need to have training, Laurence says, "so they know how to engage and ask questions and not have their own biases [about prostitution] come through."

Three Steps to Trauma-Informed Care for Trafficked Youth

Mary Schmidbauer directs Second Chance, a Toledo, OH, program that works with trafficked women and girls. In her interactions with young people, she uses a model she calls R.A.E., or Respect, Affirm, Empower:

Respect where they come from, what they've been through, where they're at.

Affirm their surviving, their ingenuity and creativity.

Empower them to use the traits and qualities they know to make safer, better, more powerful choices for themselves.

The model could work well with any runaway or homeless young person, Schmidbauer says.

Laurence and Meyers emphasize that those who work with trafficked youth need to make no judgments. At the most basic level, staff need to understand that trafficked youth are coerced and exploited victims who often don't see themselves that way. A trafficked girl might call a man her boyfriend and believe he's her boyfriend, Schmidbauer says, "but he's really her pimp."

To promote the feeling of safety, programs should have policies that prohibit staff and youth from using the word "prostitute" or other derogatory terms, Laurence says. She also recommends hiring culturally competent staff and aiming for racial, ethnic and age diversity, as well as having staff who have survived trafficking or who understand the subculture and issue.

"People who won't say, 'Oh that's so horrible,' or have a rescue mentality," she says. "It's not about rescuing young people. It's about giving them a safe environment to grow and have opportunities to move on with their lives."

On Their Own, Still Safe

Focused aftercare services can help youth stay on the right track when they leave a program and begin life on their own.

Things were going so well: A young woman who had recently left the transitional living program run by Youth Focus in High Point, NC, had just secured an apartment and a new job. She was making a life for herself that would have been inconceivable just a short while earlier, when she was homeless.

But her boyfriend was pressuring her. He moved in, borrowed money from her instead of getting his own job, and invited people over who brought drugs.

Because program director Karen Bridges and other Youth Focus staff regularly checked in with

FYSB's Collaboration with Innocence Lost

The Family and Youth Services Bureau and the Federal Bureau of Investigation are working together to test the ways runaway and homeless youth programs and local anti-trafficking task forces can collaborate to serve trafficked youth.

Several FYSB-funded runaway and homeless youth programs work closely with the FBI's Innocence Lost task forces in their areas. The task forces bring together local and federal law enforcement and service providers to recover victims of sexual exploitation and bring traffickers to justice.

"The key to combating domestic trafficking of young people for sex is for law enforcement and social services providers to work together," says Curtis O. Porter, of FYSB's runaway and homeless youth programs. "We believe the lessons learned from these four demonstration cities can be spread across the country to the 40 other Innocence Lost task forces."

the young woman, they knew what was going on and could discreetly step in. To keep the young woman safe from old risks, they emphasized her new positive opportunities.

After steady, nonjudgmental discussions with Bridges about the importance of focusing on her own well-being and seeking out positive relationships to help her achieve her goals, the young woman decided to break up with her boyfriend.

On their own, youth who've recently left residential programs risk falling back in with abusive family members, violent communities or old friends who aren't aware of their new lifestyles. They also risk forgetting the lessons they learned in life skills classes, focused on helping them lead safe, structured, independent lives. They still need someone there to help them navigate independence, and personalized, and attentive aftercare programs like the one at Youth Focus and other youth-serving agencies can serve as safety nets and prevent them from returning to dangerous old patterns and habits.

"They may have sat in the classes or passed the test," explains Katie Kitchin, executive director of Memphis's Community Alliance for the Homeless, "but when they actually go back into situations of stress they fall into old patterns." An effective program, she explains, "provides the supports to you when you're back in your natural environment. You're much more likely to retain those lessons over time this way."

▶ SETTING YOUTH UP FOR SAFETY AND SUCCESS

The first step to keeping youth safe through aftercare is planning. At Youth Focus, Bridges and her colleagues help their clients create an individualized safety plan.



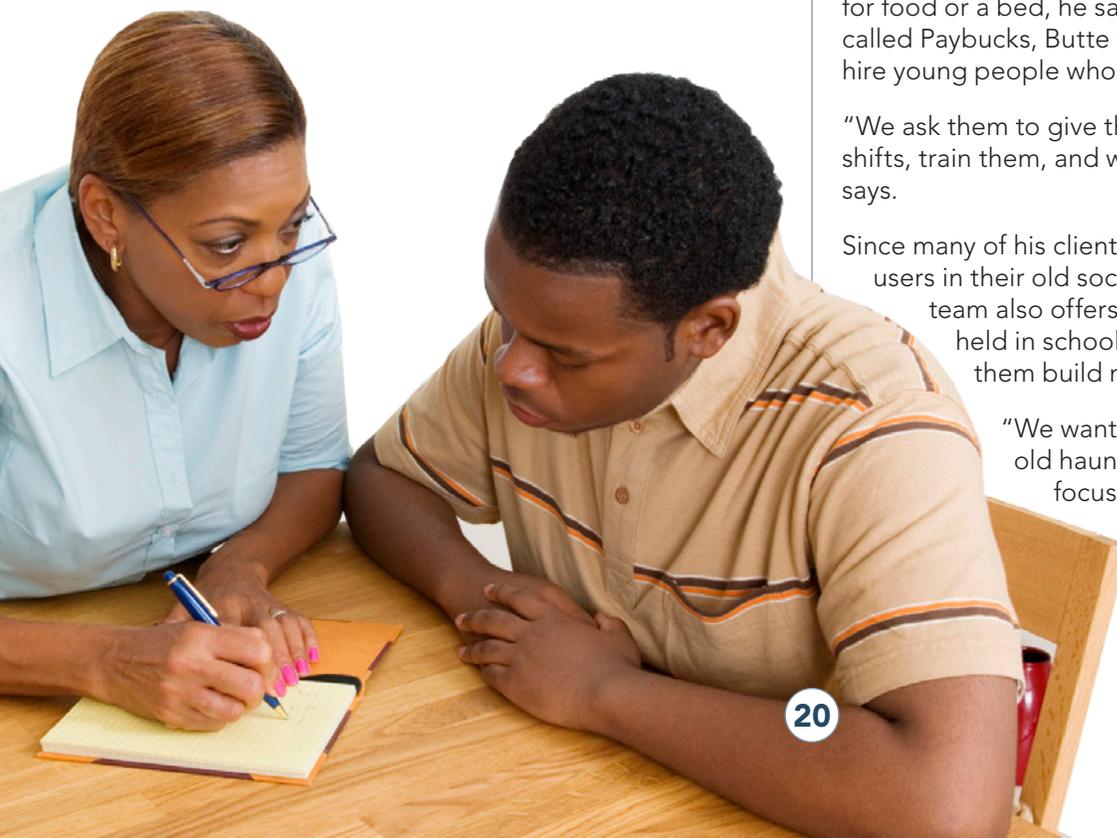
Before young people begin life on their own, Bridges sits down with them to make a list of possible dangers or troubles they might encounter—anything from being late on a rent payment to having a violent person show up at their apartment. Then she makes sure the youth has a protocol and number to call for every situation.

The next step is keeping in touch regularly.

Kitchin says that her organization schedules drop-in visits at the youths' convenience, 30, 60 and 90 days after a youth leaves the program. Home visits mean the young people don't have to travel or go out of their way to see a counselor, and it gives the counselors an intimate view of a client's lifestyle. Kitchin addresses problems as they arise, the better to let young people take the lead in their own recovery process.

Kitchin remembers one client who, by the look and smell of things, had obviously used marijuana right before a visit. The young person's indiscretion prompted a serious discussion of the risks of drug use, rather than a lecture about what the client should or should not do.

"Since we're not there to take anybody's housing away or instill a penalty, we can have a conversation about substance abuse or other problems with more trust," Kitchin says. "They really feel they're being listened to, and we respond to that problem through counseling and therapy."



▶ A NEW JOB AND NEW FRIENDS

Even with support, youth may feel lonely starting anew. They may reach out to the wrong people for help, or give a hand to someone undeserving. Bridges has done her job long enough to know that young people typically don't respond well to recriminations to stay away from bad people—especially when those people are friends they've had for years. Instead, as in the case of the client with the bulldozing boyfriend, she works with newly independent clients to help identify their own best interests and steer clear of negative influences from their earlier, more dangerous lifestyles.

"Particularly if they've had some negative relationships with boyfriends," Bridges says, "it's our job to help them become empowered. We talk with them about their relationships and encourage them to be more thoughtful of the ones they begin in the future. We want them to see what they do for themselves."

Scott Kennelly, assistant director of clinical services for the Butte County Behavioral Health Program in California, says that in addition to feeling empowered, young people need healthy alternatives if they are to avoid heading right from a residential program back to an unsafe home or community.

For example, with money in their pockets, young people are less likely to rely on old acquaintances for food or a bed, he says. So, through a program called Paybucks, Butte County pays employers to hire young people who leave state shelters.

"We ask them to give the young people some shifts, train them, and we'll pay their wages," he says.

Since many of his clients have gangs and drug users in their old social networks, Kennelly's team also offers positive activities, many held in schools or outdoors, to help them build new friendships.

"We want to make it easy to avoid old haunts," Kennelly says. "We focus on helping them stay clean and sober and connect with positive peers."

SELF-SUFFICIENCY

In this section, we focus on ways to improve self-sufficiency for runaway and homeless youth. First, we hear from a group of youth workers about the biggest barriers to formerly homeless young people's independence and how they can be overcome. Next, we learn how formerly homeless youth can market their "street skills" as valuable job skills. And last, we look at some different ways to prepare youth for college—potentially the greatest single step they can take to attain permanent self-sufficiency.

Helping Youth Become Self-Sufficient

Self-sufficiency is the ultimate goal for any young person who is living on the street. So how can youth workers help these young people take that final step into gainful employment, stable housing, or financial security?

NCFY asked 6 experts the following question: *What are the biggest obstacles to helping youth become self-sufficient, and how do you overcome them?*

Here's what they said:

Brian Nickodemus is a Youth Leader with Project Everlast in Scottsbluff, Nebraska:

I think the biggest obstacles in our programs, I think it's helping them get to an emotional point where they can live on their own. A lot of the youth who come in are sixteen, seventeen. They've had bad relationships with their parents and things like that. And so, they get out and they're really excited to be on their own. And then they realize they have nothing to do once they get out and they sit in their apartment all day or do that sort of thing. So I think the biggest challenge is getting them to understand that there's a lot more to being on your own than just being on your own. You have to keep yourself occupied so you don't fall into a depression and not do anything. We have a guy who comes and he's a goal coach. And so maybe once a week

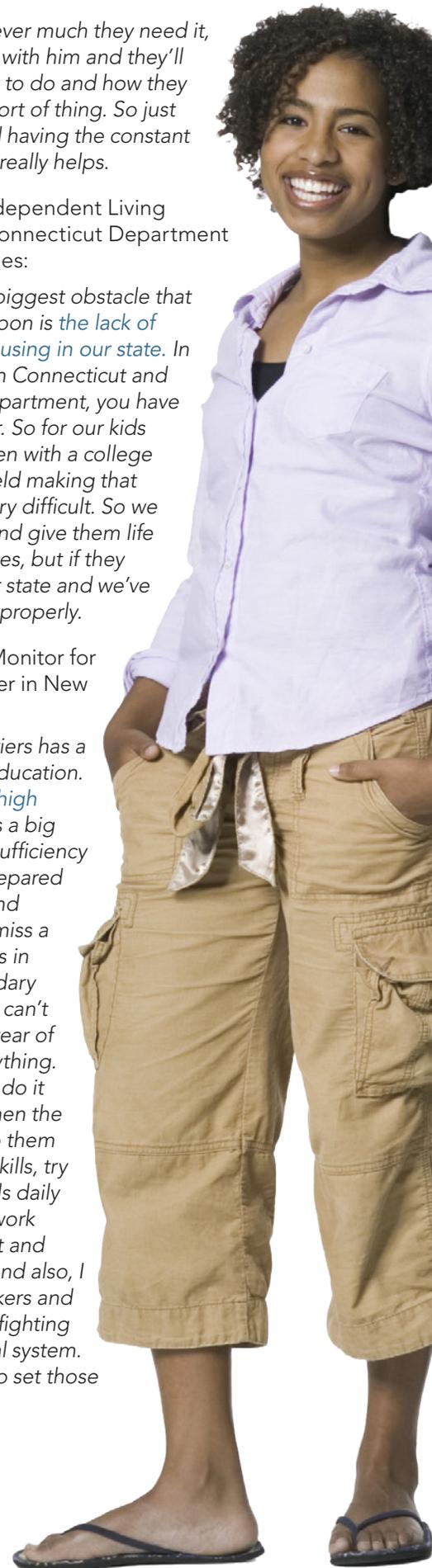
or once a month, however much they need it, they'll come and meet with him and they'll discuss what they want to do and how they plan to do it and that sort of thing. So just keeping in contact and having the constant contact with the youth really helps.

Lisa Driscoll is the Independent Living Coordinator for the Connecticut Department of Children and Families:

I think that the biggest obstacle that we're coming upon is the lack of housing, affordable housing in our state. In order to afford to live in Connecticut and have a one bedroom apartment, you have to make \$44,000 a year. So for our kids coming out of care, even with a college degree, starting in a field making that amount of money is very difficult. So we can educate our kids and give them life skills and great resources, but if they can afford to live in our state and we've really not served them properly.

Victor Rose is a Site Monitor for Ali Forney Youth Center in New York City:

One of the barriers has a lot to do with education. And I think the lack of high quality education plays a big role in the lack of self-sufficiency because they're not prepared for higher education and employment. So they miss a lot of foundational skills in elementary and secondary schools that they really can't regain just in like one year of remedial classes or anything. I think one way we can do it is to continue to lengthen the programs that will help them regain some of those skills, try to reinforce certain skills daily if we can through our work with case management and counseling and stuff. And also, I just think as social workers and social service workers, fighting for a better educational system. So that we can begin to set those foundations someday.



Focusing on Outcomes for Youth: Self-Sufficiency

Marilyn Lanphier is the State Project Director for Youth and Family Services in El Reno, Oklahoma:

“ I think probably one of the big obstacles is **employment**. We develop a business committee through the Chamber of Commerce and the businesses got together to talk about what were resources available in that community. And would they then assist us with employing the young people in a way that would be kind of an internship where we would pay the young people, but they would get an opportunity to see what the benefits of young people working in their business. So that they get a faceto face where it wouldn't be a real burden to them moneywise.

Damien Domingues is a youth worker for the Project SOS Transitional Living Program in Gering, NE:

“ I guess from my point of view, I guess if you **get to know the youth, like at an early age**, like if they were in a shelter, and if you continue talking to them while they're growing up, it's more easy for them to listen to what you have to say about what they're going through. And they'll probably be able to, I don't know, I guess ask you how you've dealt with things. Since I've been in a shelter and have been in foster care. So I could just explain to them how to, I guess, overcome their problems to be able to become independent and not have to depend on anybody else to do anything for them and basically to grow up. That's how I usually do it. Because it's easier for me to get to know them and figure out a way to talk to them after meeting them while they're in the shelter and then talking to them after we get out of the shelter and talking about some other things that I can do for them.

Sharon Sprecher is the Social Case Worker with the Family and Children's Unit in the Boulder County Department of Housing and Human Services:

“ Getting the kids to realize the importance of staying in school and getting their degree. Getting them to see how important it is, getting a job early, getting a resume out. We've had to do a lot of community outreach, mainly because trying to get housing for kids who don't have references or have high paying jobs has

been difficult. So we're trying to educate the community in doing a lot of outreach. **Getting them the Medicaid for the kids that they get when they age out of our system is just great.** And then they can, you know, a lot of them have depression, anxiety and they're able to continue their medical care after they age out, which I think is a big plus.



From The Street to the Office: Helping Homeless Youth Recognize Their Workplace Potential

Carl was always getting kicked out of class for making everyone laugh. Today, he has a job on the pediatric ward of a hospital, where he lifts the spirits of sick children.

Jonsie ran in to trouble with the law for her graffiti. Now she's enrolled in an art program at her college and designs T-shirts for a clothing company.

Living on his own for so long, Santos had no choice but to cook for himself. Now his lasagna is a big hit in the hospital café where he works.

In each of these cases, a youth worker helped the young person translate what might seem like bad behavior or a coping mechanism into strengths with real value in the workplace. Homeless youth acquire many skills simply by virtue of surviving on the street, and with the right guidance from youth workers, they can recognize their talents for adaptability, survival, time management, problem solving, quick learning and prioritizing.

"As mentors we are the middle point between the 'real world' and the teacher or job," says Bryan Ross, mentor coordinator for YouthBuild Pasadena in California.

Ross encourages youth to "name it and claim it"—to translate their best attributes into language that employers can understand. He says that discipline and a serious work ethic are attributes that can be considered "street skills" that are easily transferrable into the work environment. He believes that homeless youth's most effective skills are their "people skills." He says, "They can easily identify who can help them and who can hurt them."

To recognize their own strengths, however, youth must be exposed to workplace settings and taught how to recognize the culture and norms of these environments, says Patricia Gill, senior program associate at the Institute for Educational Leadership's Center for Workforce Development in Washington, DC. Workplace preparation should be hands-on and also include opportunities for youth to evaluate how they have done, she says. Here are

some activities you can use to help youth explore their strengths:

Act it out. Gill suggests holding mock interviews, which can prompt youth to recognize the skills they already possess. For instance, many homeless youth are skilled at coping under stress. Ask them an interview question that addresses stress management in the workplace, such as, "If you had to answer the phone, respond to an email from your supervisor, and complete a project that is due in the next hour, how would you handle it?" Then highlight the positive points they made in their response.

Take a field trip. Visiting various companies and organizations enables youth to see the different skill sets that contribute to any workplace.

Gill has even taken students to the zoo for career exploration. "Youth were required to ask any person working at the zoo about their job, what they do, and what education was required for that job," she says. Youth met a zoo event planner, landscaper and even a pool filtration specialist—jobs that might fit youth with diverse interests and street skills.

After going on a site visit, talk to youth about the skills they have that could fit into a particular work setting.

Get into the team spirit. Team-building exercises teach youth how group work and collaboration prepare them for work settings. Consider exercises like developing a strategy to help the local business community collaborate with your youth program. Have youth think about who they should be talking to, what the best way is to communicate with each stakeholder, and how will they market the idea to everyone.

Some youth may already be skilled in team-building. Even those who aren't may be highly independently resourceful. Help them appreciate this as a strength that could fit into a larger group.

Give second chances. Not all youth will be able to recognize their strengths right away and develop them to be successful in the workplace. The needs of each youth—mental health support or educational assistance, for example—will play a part in determining how long it may take to move them toward self-sufficiency. Supporting youth when they stumble and helping them pick themselves back up can help them build character as well as understanding of what makes the work world tick and how they fit in.

The Golden Ticket: Putting College Within Homeless Youths' Reach

Jessica McCormick never doubted she was going to college.

Not when she ran away from a violent home the summer before her senior year. Not when she bounced among the houses of friends and extended family. Not when, more than once, she wound up living on the streets of her hometown, Grand Rapids, MI, for several weeks.

Despite everything, McCormick got good grades, worked in her high school's main office, sent off her college application and graduated. In June 2010, she received an acceptance letter from Aquinas College, a liberal arts school in Grand Rapids. And she realized she couldn't afford to go.

On average, **higher education boosts people's lifetime** earnings compared to having a high school-level diploma or less. For unaccompanied youth like McCormick, who have no fixed residence or family support, "It's the door out of not being able to get a job, not being able

to support yourself," she says—in other words, a first step toward economic independence, a meaningful career and overall self-sufficiency.

But unaccompanied young people face many hurdles to going to college, say McCormick and Barbara Duffield, policy director of the National Association for

the Education of Homeless Children and Youth. Those obstacles include not having the money for deposits and fees, lack of knowledge about their rights and the benefits they may be eligible for, daunting paperwork, and lack of support as they attempt to navigate the higher education system on their own. For example, many youth may not know that the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 expanded the definition of "independent students" eligible to apply for financial aid without a parent or guardian's approval or financial records. Now that category includes unaccompanied homeless youth and foster youth.

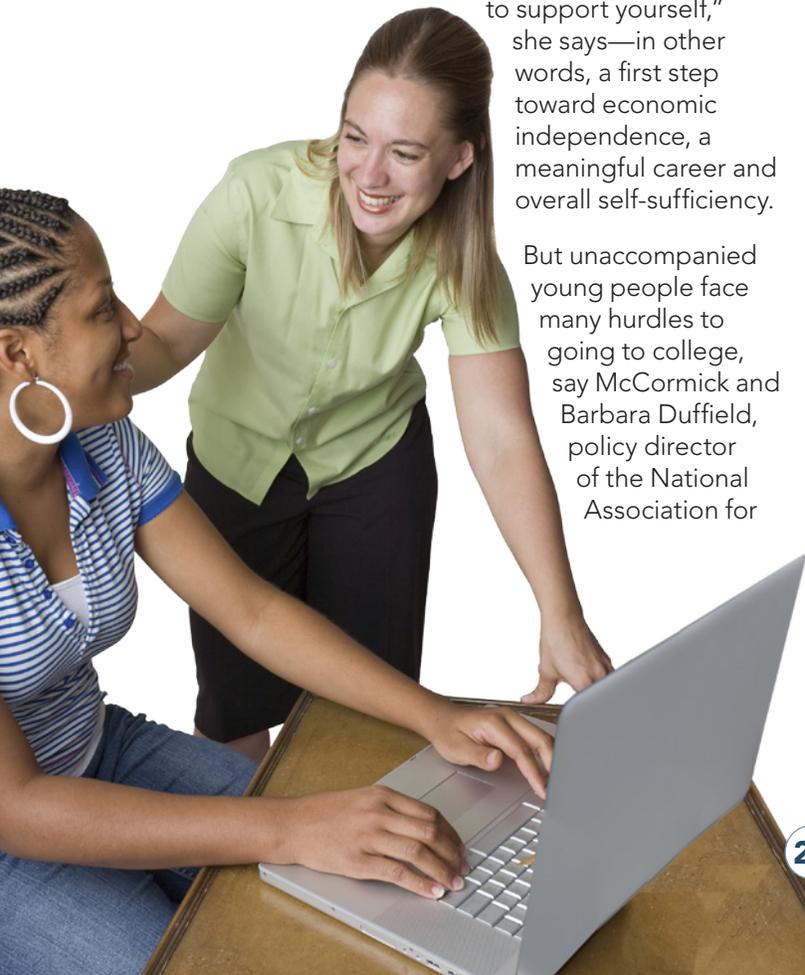
"The policies are in place, but the implementation over the past three years has been rocky," Duffield says.

Duffield says relationship-building and partnerships among social services providers, state and school district homelessness liaisons, state departments of education, and colleges and universities will be key to ensuring that more unaccompanied young people go to college—and graduate. A few states, like Colorado and North Carolina, have implemented such statewide partnerships to smooth the way for homeless and foster youth in higher education.

But Duffield says, "You don't need to wait for a state network to start making it happen locally." She says youth-serving organizations can identify the nearby colleges their youth are most interested in attending, then work with each institution's financial aid, admissions and student affairs offices to streamline the process for admitting and supporting homeless students.

In McCormick's case, her social workers at Arbor Circle, a Grand Rapids social services nonprofit, jumped in to help. "They were basically saying, 'That's the golden ticket in your hand,'" McCormick says. "Don't throw it out." Arbor staff worked with the college's administrators, got McCormick financial aid, and arranged for her to start living on campus even before the semester started.

Now 20 and a rising junior majoring in sociology and community leadership, McCormick has started an organization, called Hope House, that will support unaccompanied youth at her college by offering life-skills training, tutoring, mentoring, and other services and by acting as a liaison to the college's administration.



“In my ideal world,” she says, “every homeless youth would have a person or family member who would encourage them and help them find their golden ticket.”

Here are some steps you can take to help youth in your program make the leap to higher education:

Show them it’s within reach. Duffield says unlike Jessica McCormick, many unaccompanied high-school-age youth view college as an unattainable goal. “They need to know as early as possible that despite their family situation, despite their financial situation, they can get financial aid,” she says.

In addition, touring local college campuses can demystify college for youth and put them in the mindset of applying. Work with the admissions office or recruiters to set up appointments and make sure college staff understand the situations and needs of unaccompanied youth.

Simplify the paperwork. Applying to college involves a lot of forms. Unaccompanied students need help verifying their independent status for the Federal Application for Student Aid, or FAFSA, proving their residence to qualify for in-state tuition at state institutions, filling out application and financial aid forms, and writing college essays.

McCormick advises adults, “Instead of handing youth a packet and asking them to fill it, walk kids through it. ... We’re young adults, but we’re not mini-adults. We don’t understand everything yet.”

Among NAEHCY’s higher education resources is a brief on helping unaccompanied youth apply for financial aid. Youth workers can enlist high school counselors and college admissions and financial aid staff to help with these steps.

Deal with fees and deposits. Students with economic need can have the fees waived for the two common standardized tests, the SAT and ACT. Some colleges, including Pensacola State College in Florida, waive application fees for students who qualify for the test-fee waivers. If colleges don’t have standard policies, talk to their admissions office on students’ behalf.

Young people may also need housing deposits to hold their college spaces or dorm rooms. You can help them plan to save, negotiate a waiver from their college, or locate sources of funding.

Put them in good hands. As youth workers know, unaccompanied youth often need more intense academic, mental health and other support. Many need help with study skills, time management and decision making, and don’t know who to ask.

Jeff Benjamin, a recruiter at Pensacola State, recently gave a college tour to about 15 homeless students from the Santa Rosa County School district. “On the tour, I introduced them to at least five people they need to know,” he says, including staff in admissions, financial aid, academic advising, student affairs and the career center.

You can also make sure youth know where to find the campus tutoring center, mental health professionals and other support services.

Set them up with housing for school breaks. For McCormick, vacation housing is still a problem. This summer, she had two months of on-campus housing, which she paid for with a stipend from Arbor Circle and her own savings from an internship with the Grand Rapids Area Coalition to End Homelessness. The rest of the summer she crashed in the living room of a friend.

Some colleges make housing available to international students during breaks, and McCormick says negotiating spaces for homeless students may be an option. Colleges may not know that they can use federal student support services funds to pay for temporary housing for unaccompanied youth during breaks, so talk to the student affairs office and the housing office to work something out.



The publication was developed for the Family and Youth Services Bureau by JBS International, Inc., under Contract No. HHSP23320095638WC, Order No. HHSP23337013T from the Administration on Children, Youth and Families; Administration for Children and Families; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, to manage the National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth.

National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth,
5515 Security Lane, Suite 800,
North Bethesda, MD 20852.

Phone: (301) 608-8098

Fax: (301) 587-4352

Email: ncfy@acf.hhs.gov

Design/Layout: Claire Macdonald