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Meeting the Needs of Runaway and Homeless Young Mothers and Young Mothers-to-Be

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Although teenage pregnancy and birth rates are lower now than they have been in several decades, many runaway and homeless youth are pregnant, parenting or both. Some adolescent girls run away from or are forced to leave home because they are pregnant. Others become pregnant after leaving home.

In either case, these young women are more likely to experience pregnancy complications and negative pregnancy outcomes than the average pregnant teen. Once they become mothers, they are more likely to be living in unstable, if not dangerous situations, less likely to have relationships with supportive adults, and more likely to have unmet basic needs than teenage mothers who are housed. They also face all of the same risks as other runaway and homeless youth.

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act authorizes three federally-funded programs that are administered by the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). One of those programs, the Basic Center Program (BCP), funds grantees that provide runaway and homeless

youth under age 18 with temporary shelter (i.e., up to 21 days), crisis intervention, counseling, family unification services and after care services. Although BCP grantees can and do provide services to runaway and homeless youth who are pregnant or parenting, The Night Ministry's Open Door Shelter (ODS) in Chicago's Lakeview neighborhood is the only one that specifically targets these young women.

ODS - Lakeview's 8-bed, 8-crib shelter provides temporary housing, case management and other services to runaway, "locked out" and homeless youth who are pregnant or parenting. Youth workers maintain a homelike environment, serve as positive role models, provide emotional support and enforce shelter rules. Case managers provide counseling, conduct support groups, assist with goal planning, make referrals, and facilitate family reunification. Residents participate in the Response-Ability Pregnant and Parenting Program (RAPPP) which helps them (1) exit to safe and stable housing; (2) strengthen family relationships; and (3) develop basic life and parenting skills using the Family Life and Parenting curriculum. ODS-Lakeview also provides aftercare services,

including case management and family support, to help residents maintain stable living arrangements once they leave the shelter.

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analyzed intake and exit data collected by ODS-Lakeview from the 253 young women who were served between May 2007 and December 2011. This includes 63 young women who experienced more than one shelter stay.

At intake, the young women ranged in age from 14 to 19 years old (average = 17.3), and were predominantly African American.¹ Nearly half (46%) were pregnant and more than half (59%) were parenting. Although ODS-Lakeview cannot serve youth who are currently in foster care, nearly one in five (18%) had a history of out-of-home care placement.

Almost two thirds (64%) of these young women cited family conflict as a reason they were homeless, had run away from home, or had been “locked out.” Domestic violence, the next most common reason, was cited by 10%. Although just 6% of the young women cited pregnancy, pregnancy may have contributed to the family conflict that many did report.

The average shelter stay lasted 25 days, but nearly one quarter (23%) of the young women stayed at the shelter for no more than one day and another quarter (26%) stayed for over four weeks. Young women age 18 and older stayed twice as many days, on average, as young women under age 18 (i.e., 35 vs. 17 days). This difference reflects the fact that BCP grantees can generally shelter minors for a maximum of 21 days.

More often than not, the young women are reunified with their families. More than half (56%) of the young women, including the vast majority of those under age 18 (71%) exited to the home of a parent/guardian or other relative. However, reunification is not always a viable option, and most of the young women who did not return to family moved in with friends (11%) or transitioned to an unknown destination (17%).

These intake and exit data provide important information about the young mothers and mothers-to-be that ODS-Lakeview serves, but the picture that emerges is incomplete. A fuller understanding comes from interviews conducted by researchers from the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) with 27 current and former shelter residents. Transcripts from those interviews were analyzed by researchers from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Among the key findings were the following:

- Almost all the young women characterized the shelter as a very supportive environment. Many contrasted the support they received while at the shelter to the support that their families had repeatedly failed to provide. In fact, several of the young women had come to regard the staff and other residents as family, with staff playing a maternal role.
- Some of the young women objected to the shelter’s rules as both unnecessary and unfair whereas others, especially those who had stayed at the shelter more than once, had developed an appreciation for the rules, including those they did not like. The young women were able to see how they stood to

¹ These data reflect the characteristics of the young women at the time of their first ODS-Lakeview stay if they stayed at ODS-Lakeview more than once.

benefit from the rules in the long run.

- One of the lessons the young women took away from their shelter stay was about personal responsibility. If they wanted something done, they needed to do it themselves rather than expecting someone else to do it for them. Many also realized that their lives were headed in the wrong direction and that they needed to make some major changes if they wanted to get back on the right track.
- Pregnancy and parenthood had forced these young women to “grow up” much sooner than their peers. Putting their children’s needs ahead of their own meant that they were missing out on their teenage years.
- These young women were not afraid to admit that parenting was a tough job. Being a poor, single parent left them feeling stressed and tired, and most could not depend on the father of their child(ren) for any help.
- Finally, despite the challenges they faced, these young women had ambitions and their children gave them the strength to persevere.

Moving Forward

The RAPP Program provides an array of critical services to Chicago’s runaway, homeless and locked-out youth who are pregnant or parenting. Although two recent studies have contributed to our understanding of their experiences and needs, much about this population remains to be learned. Some of the most pressing questions concern the relationship among family conflict, teenage pregnancy, and the risk of becoming a runaway, homeless or locked out youth.

A fuller understanding of how these problems are related could lead to better targeted prevention strategies. It will also be important to evaluate the effectiveness of different approaches when it comes to engaging pregnant and parenting youth while they are shelter residents, providing ongoing supports for those who can be reunified with family, and addressing the longer-term housing needs of those who do not have a home to which they can go.

The Night Ministry is a Chicago-based organization that works to provide housing, healthcare and human connection to members of our community struggling with poverty or homelessness. With an open heart and an open mind, we accept people as they are and work to address their immediate physical, emotional and social needs while affirming their sense of humanity. Through the Night Ministry’s Health Outreach Bus, Youth Outreach Van and Youth Shelter Network, we work on the ground in Chicago neighborhoods to reach adults, teens, pregnant and new moms who have nowhere else to go.

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