



# Lessons From The Field

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## Helping Youth at Risk of Homelessness: Success Stories

# Using Case Records to Understand Client Experiences

The Children's Bureau, within the Administration for Children and Families (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services) is funding a multi-phase grant program to build the evidence base on what works to prevent homelessness among youth and young adults who have been involved in the child welfare system. This program is referred to as Youth At-Risk of Homelessness (YARH). Eighteen organizations received funding for the first phase, a two year planning grant (2013 – 2015). Grantees used the planning period to conduct data analyses to help them understand their local population and develop a comprehensive service model to improve youth outcomes related to housing, education and training, social well-being, and permanent connections. Six of those organizations received funding to refine and test their comprehensive service models during the second phase, a three-year initial implementation grant (2015 – 2018).

**Lighthouse Youth Services**, established in 1969, is a nonprofit organization based in Cincinnati, Ohio, that provides a continuum of care through services to more than 5,000 families and youth in crisis each year. Lighthouse is one of six organizations that are continuing to implement and refine their interventions through a Phase II YARH grant in 2015. To learn more about Lighthouse, visit [www.lys.org](http://www.lys.org).

*This is one of several real-life stories about strategies used by organizations that serve youth and young adults who have been involved in the child welfare system and are at risk of homelessness. Collecting and sharing these lessons with organizations that have similar missions is the first step in developing evidence on how to meet the needs of this population.*

## What particular problem did you face during the planning grant period?

As Lighthouse got deeper into the planning process, we realized that even though we had input from our Youth

Advisory Council, we were not getting the complete picture of how clients were moving through our system. We wanted to get a better idea of what a true client experience looks like from beginning to end.

## How did you successfully address that challenge?

The Lighthouse team realized we could only do this by diving into the actual cases of clients in the homeless system who were served by us. Initially, we had concerns because we knew we would be opening ourselves up to scrutiny and potentially exposing our flaws, but we decided it would be worthwhile if it meant being the catalyst for change and more positive client outcomes.

We identified 30 clients who had been helped by Lighthouse's services for the homeless, and then we looked at the hard-copy and electronic files documenting the history of the services these clients received from Lighthouse. This history spanned their experiences from intake through discharge, and often encompassed multiple programs over several years. A group of staff who met specific licensure criteria was asked to take on one,

two, or three cases each to review. The reviews included a deep dive into the paper file along with a review of the documentation in our electronic records. We did not have records from any of our partner agencies, so we relied on Lighthouse records. The reviewer wrote a two- to three-page summary of the case, documenting the services received, childhood history, missed opportunities, risk and protective factors, and a conclusion.

### What lessons did you draw from this experience?

The grant project allowed us to get a very clear picture of the gaps in our services and the changes we need to make system-wide to improve client outcomes. Even though the actual names were changed, reviewing and discussing the narrative summaries gave the staff,

youth council, and community planning partners new insights and ideas to improve youth services.

### What advice do you have for other organizations that may be considering a similar strategy?

A willingness to expose opportunities for improvement within the agency is important to create necessary change. For example, in all 30 clients we observed early exposure to trauma. Often, this trauma was not addressed at the necessary level and resulted in behaviors and health conditions that impacted the clients' opportunities and actions later in life. As a result, Lighthouse is now on the path to becoming a trauma-informed agency, and we have improved our trauma screening and treatment options for clients.

For more information on YARH, please see <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/research/project/building-capacity-to-evaluate-interventions-for-youth-with-child-welfare-involvement-at-risk-of-homelessness>.

## More stories in this series!

Read these other success stories:

- Using a Predictive Risk Model to Identify Youth at Risk for Homelessness
- Using Case Records to Understand Client Experiences

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