Lessons From The Field

Y A R H
Youth At-Risk of Homelessness

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Helping Youth at Risk of Homelessness: Success Stories

Using a Predictive Risk Model to Identify Youth at Risk for Homelessness

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).

United Way of King County works to support the development of young children, support the pursuit of GEDs and job experience for youth, reduce economic and food insecurity for families, and end homelessness in Seattle, Washington. To learn more about the United Way of King County, visit www.uwkc.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?

We knew young people were leaving foster care and becoming homeless, but we did not know the scale of the problem. We wanted to comprehend that, and if possible, we wanted more than a number; we wanted comprehensive data that could help us devise solutions to the problem.

How did you successfully address that challenge?

Using Washington State's INVEST, an integrated database, researchers from the state's Department of Social and Health Services-Research, Data and Analysis (DSHS-RDA) division identified the youth who exited foster care in specific years, whether or not they experienced homelessness, and other key characteristics of their case and experiences. The researchers used that information to identify the risk factors that determine whether a young person in care is at the highest risk for homelessness, and to develop a predictive risk model to calculate the likelihood that a youth will experience homelessness. Risk factors include being a parent and being African American.

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What lessons did you learn that you can share with other organizations that may be considering a similar strategy?

Data is an extremely powerful tool, but we believe it can be more powerful when it's humanized. We partner with a local advocacy organization called the Mockingbird Society, which trains youth to advocate for themselves. At our community meeting, researchers from DSHS-RDA presented the predictive risk model, and youth from the Mockingbird Society shared how risk factors contributed to their lived experience of homelessness. This integration of quantitative data and qualitative information gave the risk model the traction it needed in the community to be seen as a viable tool.

What are your next steps?

The predictive risk model is used to identify youth who will receive additional services. Starting in 2016, the YMCA, which is King County's independent living service provider, partnered with the national organization, Youth Villages, to deliver an intensive clinical model of the YMCA's Independent Living program. Randomized trials in Tennessee revealed that the Youth Villages model reduced homelessness among participants by 22 percent.[1] The YMCA screens youth into the program based on need, as determined by their calculated predictive risk score.

Endnotes

[1] Valentine, E., M. Skemer, and M. Courtney. "Becoming Adults: One-Year Impact Findings from the Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation." MDRC, 2015.

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.

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