Executive Summary

The definition of "homeless youth" can vary, but for the purposes of this paper, "homeless youth" and "unaccompanied homeless youth" are used interchangeably to refer to any individual, 12–24 years of age, who lives on his or her own without a parent or guardian, and lacks a stable or permanent address. The factors affecting youth homelessness are complex and distinct from those affecting other populations experiencing homelessness.

Youth homelessness is unique due to the following distinct characteristics of developing youth and young adults:
- They are still developing physically, emotionally, psychologically and socially. Despite unique strengths and assets, they are not yet fully matured adults and should not be expected to function within adult-oriented systems.
- They enter homelessness with little or no work experience.
- They are often forced into leaving the education system prior to completion (i.e., junior high and high school) as a result of homelessness and experience academic gaps due to transiency and changing schools.
- They experience high levels of criminal victimization, including sexual exploitation and labor trafficking.
- They often become homeless before developing basic life skills, such as cooking, budgeting, housekeeping, job searching, etc.
- They often distrust adults and societal systems due to the high prevalence of sexual and physical abuse, rejection and violence in their lives.

I. SERVICE CONTINUUM

Since youth experiencing homelessness are different from other populations experiencing homelessness, the corresponding response must also be different. To facilitate the creation of a youth-centric system, local, state and federal governments must strategically invest resources so that young people have access to the support they need to grow, develop and transition into independent adults. This system should provide housing and services aimed at preventing homelessness from occurring and decreasing recurring episodes of homelessness. However, it should also accommodate young people who exit and reenter multiple times. Service providers can smooth these transitions and build important trust by welcoming youth back into housing and/or supportive services as many times as needed.

Once fully-resourced, this framework would enable communities to provide readily accessible care, safety and services to youth and families in crisis, and ultimately prevent and end youth homelessness in America. The basic building blocks of a youth-centric system are summarized below.

II. PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION

A. **Prevention and outreach to connect youth to services.** Prevention is the critical first step towards an effective community response to youth homelessness. Although prevention is not always possible, the provision of appropriate, targeted services can help many at-risk youth and families avoid crisis. Some community programs are

focused on school-based interventions, offering individual and family case management to prevent runaway behavior or provide emergency rental assistance.

B. **Outreach is an important component of early intervention.** Outreach workers meet youth in the community and provide crisis counseling, service referrals and other resources to meet basic needs. Additionally, outreach workers locate potential victims of human trafficking, build relationships, and provide information so that youth experiencing homelessness know where they are able to access safety and services.

C. **Drop-in centers to engage youth and link to community resources.** Drop-in centers offer immediate services to unaccompanied homeless youth, such as food, clothing, showers, laundry, bus tokens, and personal hygiene supplies. Drop-in centers also provide counseling and other support services that allow youth to begin to address the issues that led to their homelessness or that impact their daily functioning, with the ultimate goal being to engage youth and move them into more intensive services.

D. **Shelter to provide an important first step off the street.** Emergency shelter is not a long-term solution for youth experiencing homelessness. Nevertheless, it often represents the first step on the path to longer-term stability. The provision of developmentally appropriate assessment and case management in a safe environment enables successful service referrals, family interventions and longer-term housing placements as necessary.

E. **Family engagement and reunification.** Family reconnection and reunification is an intervention that offers individual and family support for young people who become, or are at-risk of becoming, homeless. Strengths-based family reconnection is only used when safe, appropriate and possible. This approach focuses on counseling young people and their caretakers to address the problems that resulted in the youth being kicked out or running away from home.

III. HOUSING AND SUPPORT SERVICES

A. **Youth-appropriate housing programs to build independent living skills.** Transitional and other housing programs should provide a comprehensive range of support services that build independent living skills and support overall well-being. Research shows that these housing models help youth build the skills and knowledge necessary for long-term self-sufficiency.

B. **Case management to improve wellness and decision-making.** Case management is an essential component of housing programs. It serves as the mechanism for youth to develop both short- and long-term goals for education, employment, financial stability and overall physical and mental well-being by creating individualized case plans to achieve those goals.

C. **Connection to education to increase future income earning capability.** Employment opportunities increase as youth accumulate more education. In order to ensure youth can obtain and maintain career track employment, they must receive support to graduate from high school (or earn a GED) and attain post-secondary credentials.

D. **Workforce development to enable youth to compete in the job market.** In addition to education, the development of workforce skills is also important for ensuring long-term economic viability. This includes both soft skills development, such as knowledge of expectations in the workplace. Furthermore, building transferable hard skills that help youth compete in the job market is critical for longer-term success.

IV. SERVICE FRAMEWORKS

A. **Culturally competent services.** Youth providers should structure their programs to ensure inclusive standards of service provision. Services and housing should be available to youth no matter their culture, socio economic background, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity.

B. **Positive Youth Development (PYD) focuses on meeting each young person at their unique development stage and supporting positive growth.** PYD focuses on youth having positive interactions with adults and other young people. This approach enables youth to make healthy choices, develop and achieve personal goals and feel in control of their lives.[1]

C. **Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) provides services in a way that is appropriate for youth who have experienced abuse and/or trauma.** This approach creates settings where young people are safe and able to heal. Research shows that healing from trauma has a positive effect on housing stability.

D. **Utilizing a strengths-based approach to services.** This treatment model helps youth identify their strengths across different life domains and build those strengths to overcome personal challenges. As a result, youth develop a greater understanding of the strengths, skills and resources they can use in everyday life.

E. **Services for survivors of human trafficking.** Youth who have been trafficked can receive appropriate care from service providers. These programs can combine existing models of trauma-informed care with wrap-around services to support survivors of human trafficking.[2]

V. CONCLUSION

In order to end youth homelessness, communities must be able to provide stable, flexible and age-appropriate housing and services to all youth in need. This system should target young people currently experiencing homelessness, as well as at-risk youth and families. In other words, prevention is a critical component of an effective community response.

The realization of a fully-resourced, youth-centric system depends on needs-based investments from both the government and philanthropists. At the same time, it requires the removal of existing eligibility barriers that prevent youth from accessing the housing and services they need. In the process of creating this system, federal and local leaders must work together to improve cross-systems planning and collaboration.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION TO PREVENT AND END YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

The National Network for Youth recommends prioritizing, aligning, and increasing federal, state and local investments in:
- prevention and early intervention to reach youth at-risk of homelessness and families in crisis;
- developmentally appropriate housing and services to help youth stabilize, develop and transition to adulthood;
- reconnection to education and workforce development to increase future earning capability; and
- continued research, development of assessment tools, analysis of existing data and improved data collection.

1 Martin, M. & Vaughn, B. (2007). Cultural competence: the nuts & bolts of diversity & inclusion. Strategic Diversity & Inclusion Management magazine, 31-36. DTUI Publications Division: San Francisco, CA.
2 Giovengo, M.. (2013). Hearing on protecting vulnerable children: Preventing and addressing sex trafficking of youth in foster care [Testimony]. U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Human Resources. Retrieved from http://waysandmeans.house.gov/uploadedfiles/melinda_giovengo_testimony_hr102313.pdf

You can download this executive summary and the entire publication, *What Works to End Youth Homelessness: What We Know Now*, at: **www.nn4youth.org/learn/what-works.**

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The National Network for Youth