Los Angeles Convening on Youth Homelessness

Addressing Youth Homelessness: Progress, Gaps, Opportunities and Challenges

Convened by
The National Alliance to End Homelessness
The California Homeless Youth Project
February 8, 2012

Report by
André C. Wade, Program and Policy Analyst
National Alliance to End Homelessness

Editing contribution by
Shahera Hyatt, Director
California Homeless Youth Project

Preface

On February 8, 2012, individuals representing over 25 organizations in Los Angeles and elsewhere in California came together to discuss youth homelessness in Los Angeles. The purpose of the convening was to have a focused discussion about what is and is not working in serving youth who are experiencing homelessness, gaps in strategies, and emerging and promising practices. The goal was to identify progress that can be made to end youth homelessness at the local, state and federal levels.

Participating organizations were:
- Butler Family Fund
- California Coalition for Youth
- California Homeless Youth Project
- California Youth Connection
- Child Welfare Initiative
- Children's Hospital – Los Angeles
- City of Los Angeles
- Corporation for Supportive Housing
- Covenant House – California
- Every Child Foundation
- First Place for Youth
- Hathaway-Sycamores
- Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership
- Los Angeles County Probation Department
- Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center
- Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority
- Los Angeles Youth Network
- My Friend's Place
- National Alliance to End Homelessness
- Ocean Park Community Center
- Office of Senator Carol Liu
- Pacific Clinics
- Penny Lane Centers
- San Diego Youth Services
- The California Wellness Foundation
- United Friends of the Children
- Vladimir and Araxia Buckhantz Foundation

Introduction

Each year an estimated 200,000 youth are homeless in California[1]. A January 2011 Point in Time (PIT) count of homeless youth in Los Angeles identified nearly 4,000 youth residing in shelters, on the streets, or in other places not intended for human habitation on a single night[2]. These unaccompanied youth, under the age of 25, come from a variety of backgrounds and have different reasons for leaving home, various experiences of homelessness, and different interactions with the homelessness system. The services made available by providers include family intervention, employment, education, and mental and physical health services. There is a limited amount of emergency shelter, transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing in California to get youth off the street and on the pathway to self-sufficiency.

To frame the discussion during the convening, Heather Dearing of the California Coalition for Youth (CCY) presented, "Too Big to Ignore: Two Years Later," a follow-up report to the initial state-wide policy agenda that was released in 2009 by the John Burton Foundation and CCY. The report provides an outlook on the current status of 11 short- and long-term strategies at the local, state and federal levels to reduce youth homelessness in California. The policy agenda also identifies key barriers that have prevented the issue of youth homelessness from fully being addressed. A few of the strategies are:

- Build the capacity for homeless youth providers to successfully apply for local, state, and federal funding (particularly HUD funding);
- Better accommodate, in the foster care system, those homeless youth whose circumstances meet the legal definition of abuse and neglect;
- Increase access to SSI benefits for homeless youth with disabilities;
- Include the needs of homeless transition-age youth (ages 16-24) in the creation of a permanent funding source for housing development;
- Expand California's Transitional Housing Placement-Plus (THP-Plus) program to serve three out of five eligible homeless former foster youth;
- Extend the upper age limit for foster care in California to 21; and
- Pursue a research agenda on homeless youth.

Beth Stokes from the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) provided an overview of data on youth experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles and the available services. She acknowledged the progress and challenges remaining to get an accurate count of homeless youth, and understand the needs and experiences of these youth. She presented on: the enrollment of youth in various programs; household types by age and gender; reasons why youth left the home; the youth's average length of stay by destination; and the destination types and prior living situations. Also, Beth provided the most recent numbers on the sheltered versus unsheltered youth population (18-24

---

[1] John Burton Foundation and California Coalition for Youth, Too Big To Ignore: Two Years Later, 2012.
[2] Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, 2011 Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count Report, 2011.

years old) and the number of youth under 18 in the Los Angeles Continuum of Care. As noted earlier, in 2011 the PIT count revealed nearly 4,000 youth ages 18-24 experiencing homelessness, which represents eight percent of the total number of individuals experiencing homelessness at a single point in time. Of those youth, approximately 400, or 11 percent, were chronically homeless. Youth ages 18-24 were 1.9 times more likely to be in transitional housing than in emergency shelter[3].

Arlene Schneir of Children's Hospital-Los Angeles and a member of the Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership (HHYP) provided an overview of their 2010 report on homeless youth in Hollywood entitled, "No Way Home: Understanding the Needs and Experiences of Homeless Youth in Hollywood." The report provides an overview on the demographics of the youth; their experiences, service needs, and barriers to service; and recommendations for improving services and systems. She further painted a picture of the struggles and successes of providing services to youth in the Hollywood/Los Angeles area, the characteristics of the youth being served, and how HHYP works together to coordinate and utilize resources. The report states that of the 389 homeless youth surveyed in the winter and spring of 2007, 75 percent were ages 18 to 25. Younger youth under the age of 18 were more likely to identify as female; 40 percent identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or questioning; and 5 percent identified as transgender[4].

---

[3] Stokes, Beth. Hand-out titled "2011 LA CoC Youth Count which was provided at the convening.
[4] Rabinovitz, S., Desai, M. Schneir, A., & Clark, L. *No Way Home: Understanding the Needs and Experiences of Homeless Youth in Hollywood. Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership*. 2010

Small Group Discussions

A variation on the World Café format was used to hold small group discussions. Tables were organized around four different strategies needed to make progress in ending youth homelessness: Prevention, Emergency Response, Housing, and Support Services. At each table there was a group facilitator who led the discussion as well as a note-taker. Participants moved among the tables and the topical areas to explore opportunities to improve interventions for homeless youth. Approximately 20 minutes was dedicated to discussing each of the four strategies.

The following is a summary of the responses and feedback from the small group discussions.

Prevention Strategies

Q1*: What are the most common paths into homelessness for youth, and what are the early intervention points being missed along the way?*

Understanding the pathways into homelessness can help local communities develop strategies to intervene earlier and reduce the number of young people who become homeless. Participants identified many pathways into homelessness for youth, including the breakdown of families because of an economic crisis, family violence, or a family's failure to accept a youth's sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Additionally, youth may have a diagnosed or undiagnosed disability that contributes to family tension and can lead to homelessness if supportive services are not available. This can include youth who have experienced trauma, mental health issues, or substance abuse disorders.

Community-based family support programs could be strengthened to increase their capacity to support those families with adolescents who are at risk of homelessness because of extreme family conflict. Homeless youth providers can focus more on family intervention to work with families in facilitating the safe return of youth back home. Schools are often on the frontline of identifying youth who are experiencing significant challenges, including identifying youth who have already run away from home but are struggling to remain connected to school. Promoting coordination and referrals between school systems and family supportive services could help young people get connected to resources and avoid homelessness. Early detection by schools could also help those who do become homeless access the supports they need to stabilize quickly and remain connected to school and peers.

Participants noted that unaccompanied homeless youth may first become homeless with their families and many family shelters will not accept older youth. Most families that experience a housing crisis will try to double up, often in overcrowded conditions, with extended family or friends in order to avoid homelessness. When youth cannot be accommodated with their families in shelters or in doubled up situations, they are left to fend for themselves.

Family homeless systems are undergoing significant shifts which could help prevent these youth from becoming homeless on their own. More flexibility with federal resources will allow local communities to help doubled up families at risk of becoming homeless get reconnected to housing quickly, thereby preventing family separation altogether. In addition, new federal regulations will require that shelters and transitional housing programs serving families accommodate older children with their parents. While some progress is underway, it is not sufficiently realized to help many young people avoid homelessness because of their parents' poverty and housing instability.

Youth emancipating from foster care without sufficient resources or preparation to live independently are highly susceptible to becoming homeless. Similarly, some youth who have already experienced homelessness may exit an emergency shelter or transitional housing program but, without stable housing or sufficient supportive services to turn to, they may eventually fall back into homelessness. Both populations of young people may require financial support to help them pay for housing as they work to increase their earning potential and navigate supportive services that will help them become acquainted with the responsibilities of maintaining a household. While California policymakers have made a commitment to provide supportive services to help young people exiting foster care successfully transition to greater independence, these same resources are not available to similarly needy youth who have been homeless and are not connected to systems, but require the same supports.

Q2: *What would be your top recommendation for preventing youth homelessness?*

- Improve funding for all homelessness prevention activities, including family intervention and mediation as well as financial assistance, to help economically stabilize youth who can be housed independently or with their families;
- Increase collaboration across public systems serving youth, particularly schools, to improve the identification of youth at risk of homelessness and promote a coordinated response;
- Provide teachers and other frontline school personnel with training and education on youth who are at-risk of running away and those who experience homelessness, to facilitate early intervention and connection to services;
- Ensure youth in foster care are prepared for emancipation and have full access to education, employment, housing, and other supportive services and resources;
- Ensure all youth have access to an ongoing and consistent relationship with caring adults;
- Require programs serving homeless youth to offer post intervention exit plans that include follow-up and aftercare services;
- Ensure that prevention services are also targeted to younger youth; and

- Develop multi-disciplinary teams to provide integrated services to vulnerable youth and their families, such as the Community Assessment Team model used in San Diego with youth at-risk of entering or involved with the juvenile justice system.

Emergency Response Strategies

Q1: What are effective emergency response strategies for youth who are on the street?

Participants identified a range of emergency response strategies that are needed to effectively meet the needs of homeless youth in Los Angeles. This broad continuum of services includes outreach and drop-in centers that connect with youth who are residing on the streets or places not intended for human habitation, as well as low barrier shelter and housing programs to ensure youth with more significant challenges are also able to access a safe place to stay.

Participants noted that early intervention is best to minimize the amount of time youth are on the streets and disconnected from supports. Community-based programs, including family supportive services, can prevent youth homelessness and they should also be able to respond quickly and appropriately to youth in their community who do become homeless as well. One resource that was identified as particularly helpful is the California Youth Crisis Line (CYCL). The CYCL is available statewide, and offers a toll free, 24-hour, confidential hotline to help youth ages 12-24 and/or any adults supporting youth get connected to resources and supportive services.

Outreach workers and drop-in centers often serve as the first point of engagement with runaway and homeless youth. They help meet youth's basic needs, including remaining safe, while encouraging young people to enter emergency shelter programs and get connected to services.

Los Angeles has an acute shortage of emergency shelter options for youth experiencing homelessness and they are regularly turned away. With long wait lists for shelter, outreach workers now also serve as a lifeline for youth who are waiting for an emergency shelter space to open up and are eager to accept supportive services. Their work has shifted from encouraging young people to enter programs to encouraging them to hang on until the opportunity to access shelter assistance becomes available.

With a dearth of emergency shelter options for youth, participants discussed how they try to "right-size" existing resources to best meet the most pressing needs of youth. One participant, in particular, reported that his organization shifted resources from transitional housing to emergency shelter to meet the overwhelming demand from youth on the streets who were not ready to accept the requirements of the transitional housing program.

Participants also discussed the importance of programs that offer a harm reduction approach across the emergency response continuum.   Programs that use harm reduction approaches attempt to meet the needs of youth regardless of their presenting

challenges or their readiness to accept services. These programs deliver the services that their client is willing to accept while also working to minimize the danger or harm they are at risk of experiencing.

Participants noted the value that better data and awareness of the extent of homelessness among youth in Los Angeles have in improving the emergency response system. One participant from Alameda County reported that they used data on homeless youth in their community to successfully argue for a greater allocation of federal homelessness resources for youth.

Q2: What would be your top recommendation for increasing the availability of emergency response services for homeless youth?

There is a dire need to increase resources so that homeless youth have access to a safe place to stay and the ability to get connected to services that will help them transition out of homelessness. To achieve this, the community could:

- Increase the amount of homeless services dollars that are targeted to youth;
- Engage the business community to encourage new funding commitments to meet the needs of homeless youth;
- Connect youth to available permanent housing programs and opportunities in the community;
- Convert, as appropriate, existing homeless resources to meet the needs of homeless youth. This may include making adult programs more accommodating to youth, or modifying how resources for homeless youth are utilized to maximize their impact in protecting youth;
- Ensure mainstream system resources that could support youth are fully leveraged; and
- Encourage California policymakers committed to ending homelessness among former foster youth to expand their focus to all youth at risk of homelessness.

Housing Strategies

Q1: How can existing housing resources be more effectively used to give homeless youth greater access?

Participants discussed the lack of availability of shelter and transitional housing units in L.A. There are typically long waiting lists for youth programs, and bed spaces are regularly filled to capacity. This issue needs to be addressed in order to increase the number of youth who are served and decrease the number of youth who are turned away each night without a safe place to stay. One strategy that was discussed was the

idea of some current resources being dedicated to unaccompanied minors in need of emergency housing options who can be identified through outreach.

Creating a system that works better for youth may require helping youth providers access homelessness funding that is now targeted to other subgroups. Better data from the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority can be used to build the case for more housing resources.

There is a need to make programs more attractive to youth. Existing programs can implement welcoming and safe environments for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth. There may be a need to minimize upfront requirements for youth who have experienced long-term homelessness (by adopting a low barrier/low threshold approach) to fully engage youth who may have little to no family support and few resources. Through better collaboration, programs should allow for the "in and out" (youth entering, leaving and re-entering programs) that occurs with street/harder to serve youth. This may allow youth to "test" programs and decide to return without having to start over with another provider. Some programs should also consider accepting pets, as many youth are attached to their pets as a source of companionship.

Participants also discussed the need to maximize all potential resources (and program models) to provide temporary and permanent housing options for youth. Flexible rent assistance can be used to place youth in scattered-site apartments while helping them get connected to appropriate service models. Various housing models and strategies, such as scattered site or project-based Section 8 (Housing Choice Vouchers), can be used but need to find an appropriate balance between offering sufficient structure and flexibility so youth succeed. Permanent Supportive Housing can be used for youth with documented disabilities. Incorporating a triage and assessment strategy to target resources can help youth access housing and service models that best meet their needs. More flexibility may be needed from the adult homeless service system and housing providers to expand housing opportunities for youth. It is also important that when resources are used for youth, anticipated or required performance outcomes are realistic and appropriately fit their needs.

Q2: *What would be your top recommendation for providing more housing for homeless youth?*

- Allow programs serving homeless youth to extend services to youth up to age 24;
- Explore the use of the transition-in-place housing model;
- Provide permanent supportive housing for youth who require more than two years of supportive services to achieve housing stability;
- Promote the use of Emergency Solutions Grant funds to provide prevention and rapid re-housing services to homeless and at-risk youth;
- Individualize programming in transitional housing to ensure services meet the needs of each youth; and

- Ensure expectations for program performance in agencies serving homeless youth reflect outcomes that are both desirable and reasonable.

Support Strategies

Q1: What are the most effective strategies for providing health, mental health, substance abuse, and other necessary services to homeless youth?

Participants provided an array of practice strategies that are helpful in engaging and working with homeless youth. One of the most effective strategies identified is adopting a non-judgmental approach that accepts youth "where they are" and is strength-based. Providers should be trauma-informed, flexible and adaptive. Providers should also be prepared to tailor services to youth's developmental stages.

Programs serving youth should be highly accessible. There should be an open door approach to serving youth and they should be "low barrier" when possible. When possible, services should be brought to youth to facilitate access. Providers should continuously engage youth via relationship building and through the creation of materials, outreach and activities that are attractive to them.

Youth may benefit best from having the opportunity for one-on-one clinical interaction as well as non-traditional therapeutic services such as expressive arts therapy and other recreational and social activities. Most services for youth should be voluntary and carried out by highly trained staff that can provide follow-through.

Participants identified opportunities to improve how local youth programs collaborate. The Hollywood Youth Project is an example of several homeless youth program providers in one geographic area that regularly work together to facilitate joint planning and promote integrated service delivery. Participants recommended developing a way to share data across programs to avoid youth having to share their stories over and over again, which can be re-traumatizing. An example is Health Shack, which is a personal health record and information system that provides a safe way to store and share health records and other documents. Wind Youth Services, a homeless youth provider in Sacramento, CA, uses the information system which can be adopted by other providers.

Participants also discussed the value in developing partnerships to leverage services from other providers and offer a richer array of supportive services to youth. One participant discussed how he engaged leaders of multiple public systems (including leaders from the county mental health agency, juvenile justice, and child welfare) to engage in an exploration of the service needs of homeless youth. This helped build buy-in from leaders with financial resources and helped him argue for dedicated resources for services to homeless youth when these agencies issued requests for proposals.

Q2: What would be your top recommendations for providing more effective services for homeless youth?

- Continue/expand funding for transitional housing so youth have on-site supports when needed;
- Increase youth-specific emergency shelter beds so youth have enough time to stabilize;
- Coordinate and integrate multiple systems that touch youth including shelter and mainstream systems;
- Build capacity to increase the number of youth served;
- Look at developing collaborations and integrated services;
- Create a relationship-based, open door system that is available when young people need the services;
- Implement universal intake to share data, enhance collaboration, and decrease the duplication of services being provided by different programs to the same youth;
- Use wraparound services for transition age youth to improve the coordination of multiple services and case manager obligations; and
- Individually build relationships with youth to build trust.

Conclusion

The Los Angeles Convening on Youth Homelessness provided an opportunity for diverse stakeholders from the state and local levels, homeless youth providers and funders, and providers from systems such as child welfare and juvenile justice to further identify what is working and what improvements need to be made to better serve homeless youth in Los Angeles. Los Angeles (and California as a whole) has made great strides in the area of policy and practice that continue to inform the field and policy makers.

California continues to grapple with improving data on youth homelessness at the state and local levels, which would better inform policy and practice. During the convening a few major themes were identified such as a need for an increase in resources and collaborative efforts, and making housing and services more accessible and youth-focused.