


EXECUTIVE SUMMARY




Across North America and elsewhere in the world, Housing First is recognized as an effective and humane approach to addressing homelessness. The need for a consideration of how Housing First works for young people (aged 13-25) is based on concerns raised by policy-makers, practitioners and indeed, young persons themselves, about the applicability of models and approaches developed for adults who are homeless, when applied to a youthful population.

The framework presented here is intended to provide communities and funders with a clear understanding of what Housing First is, and how it can work to support young people who experience, or are at risk of, homelessness. It is the outcome of a collaborative process involving the Street Youth Planning Collaborative (Hamilton) and the National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness. The framework reflects a belief that for young people the experience of homelessness – both in terms of its causes and conditions – is distinct from that which impacts adults, and therefore the solutions must reflect these important differences. We cannot take an established approach that works for adults and simply create Housing First “Junior” by changing the age mandate. If Housing First is to work for youth, it must be built upon our understanding of the developmental, social and legal needs of young persons.



THE QUESTION IS NOT “DOES HOUSING FIRST WORK FOR YOUTH?”, BECAUSE IT WORKS FOR ANYBODY. RATHER, WE NEED TO ASK, “HOW CAN HOUSING FIRST BE ADAPTED TO MEET THE NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE WHO EXPERIENCE HOMELESSNESS?”





WHAT IS HOUSING FIRST?

At its most basic, Housing First is considered to be:

"A recovery-oriented approach to homelessness that involves moving people who experience homelessness into independent and permanent housing as quickly as possible, with no preconditions and then providing them with additional services and supports as needed. The underlying principle of Housing First is that people are more successful in moving forward with their lives if they are first housed. This is as true for homeless people and those with mental health and addiction issues as it is for anyone. Housing is not contingent upon readiness, or on 'compliance' (for instance, sobriety). Rather, it is a rights-based intervention rooted in the philosophy that all people deserve housing and that adequate housing is a precondition for recovery."

(Gaetz, 2013: 12)

Housing First means more than simply providing people with housing. It also means ensuring that people get the supports they need and desire, in ways that support their move to independence, or in the case of young people, their transition to adulthood. There is a substantial body of research that convincingly demonstrates Housing First's general effectiveness, when compared to 'treatment first' approaches. In fact, it is one of the few homelessness interventions that can definitely be considered to be a "best practice".



CAN HOUSING FIRST WORK FOR YOUTH?

Housing First programs – including the Pathways model and the *At Home/Chez Soi* project – specifically prioritize chronically homeless persons with significant mental health and addictions issues. While the question, “Does Housing First work for adults?” has effectively been answered; whether and how it works for youth still remains an askable question.

It is argued here that for young people, the need to get them into housing with appropriate supports as soon as possible is paramount. We know from research that the longer a young person is absolutely homeless or comes to rely on emergency services, the greater their entrenchment in the street youth lifestyle, the more estranged they become from mainstream services, the worse their health (mental health and addictions) becomes, and the greater likelihood of their experiencing crime and violence, as well as sexual and economic exploitation.

While there are a number of examples of communities in Canada where Housing First is being applied with youth populations, best-known example is perhaps the **Infinity Project** in Calgary, operated by **Boys and Girls Club of Calgary**. Serving young people 16-24 years of age, the goal of Infinity is to help youth become permanently housed and to increase and maintain self-sufficiency and a successful transition to adulthood. In addition to accessing housing (and obtaining rent supplements), young people are provided with a range of social supports and life skills training. An evaluation of the project shows quite successful outcomes after the first year, including a housing retention rate of 95% and increases in income stability and access to services (Scott & Harrison, 2013). Another perspective is provided by the **Youth Matters in London** project, which argues that while many young people thrive in a Housing First context, the traditional model does not work for everyone. Those with mental health and addictions issues (or a combination of both) in some cases find that the choice and independence offered by the model were too much to handle and could be experienced as a ‘set up for failure’ (Forchuk et al., 2013). Forchuk and her team conclude that a ‘one size fits all’ approach proposed by some advocates is actually quite limiting and ignores the incredible variability in needs and circumstances of young people who are homeless.

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The Core Principles of Housing First for Youth

1. Immediate access to permanent housing with no housing readiness

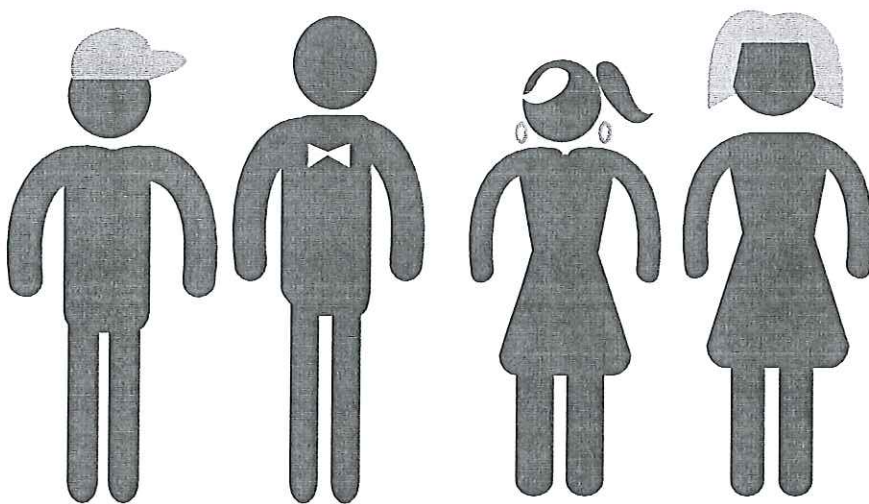
requirements. Key to the Housing First philosophy is that individuals and families are not required to first demonstrate that they are 'ready' for housing. At the same time, housing is not conditional on sobriety or abstinence. Immediate access to appropriate housing and supports is particularly crucial for young people and every effort should be made to divert them from long stays in emergency shelters.

2. Youth choice and self-determination. Housing First is a rights-based, client-centred approach that emphasizes client choice in terms of housing and supports.

- **Housing** – Young people are able to exercise some choice regarding the location and type of housing they receive (e.g. neighbourhood, congregate setting, scattered site, etc.).
- **Supports** – Young people have choices in terms of what services they receive and when to start using services.
- **Access to opportunities for education and training** – For a long-term and sustainable impact on the lives of young people, they should be encouraged and supported to (re) engage in education and, where appropriate, employment training.
- **Harm Reduction** – A core philosophy of virtually all approaches to Housing First is that there should be no requirement of sobriety or abstinence. Harm reduction aims to reduce the risks and harmful effects associated with substance use and addictive behaviours for the individual, the community and society as a whole, without requiring abstinence.

Any and all homelessness interventions must take account of the fact that youth homelessness is distinct from adult homelessness, both in terms of its causes and consequences.

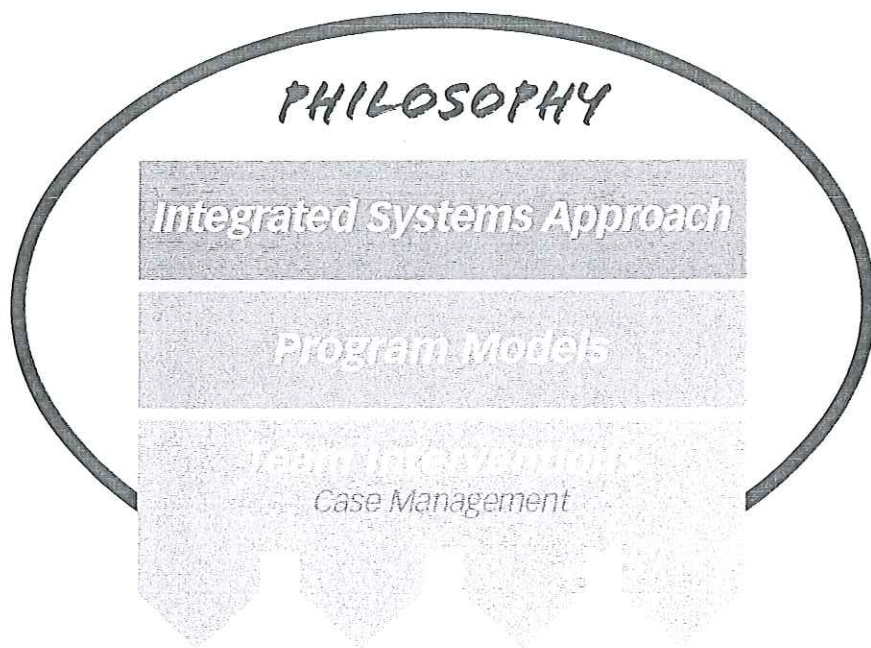
3. **Positive youth development orientation.** The focus of Housing First for youth is not merely a successful transition to independent living, but rather, is on supporting a healthy transition to adulthood. Accommodation and supports must first be designed and implemented in recognition of the developmental needs and challenges of youth and second, foster and enable a transition to adulthood and wellness based on a positive strengths-based approach.
4. **Individualized and client-driven supports.** A client-driven approach recognizes that all young people are unique individuals and so are their needs. Once housed, some people will need few, if any, supports while other people will need supports for the rest of their lives (this could range from case management to assertive community treatment). Supports may address housing stability, health and mental health needs and life skills.
5. **Social and community integration.** Part of the Housing First strategy is to help people integrate into their community and this requires socially supportive engagement and the opportunity to participate in meaningful activities. This means housing should not lead to the stigmatization or isolation of clients; young people should have opportunities for social and cultural engagement; support for family reconnection, and opportunities for participation in meaningful activities through employment, vocational and recreational activities.





In order to fully understand how Housing First is applied in different contexts, it is important to consider different models. While there are core principles that guide its application, it is worth distinguishing Housing First in terms of: a) a *philosophy*, b) a *systems approach*, c) *program models* and d) *team interventions*.

Figure 1: Application of Housing First




The Application of Housing First for Youth

Philosophy — As a *philosophy*, Housing First can be a guiding principle for an organization or community that prioritizes getting young people into housing with supports to follow. It is the belief that all young people deserve housing and that people who are homeless will do better and recover more effectively if they are first provided with housing.

Systems Approach — Within a 'system of care' approach, all services and program elements within the youth homelessness sector are guided by the principles of the model. While not all youth homelessness interventions are Housing First programs (Housing First being one of many potential interventions), each service *should be expected* to support the Housing First agenda, with each having a specific role to play in the larger system.

Program Models — Housing First can be considered more specifically as a program when it is operationalized as a service delivery model or set of activities provided by an agency or government body. It is important to note that there is not a single program model for Housing First and that it can take many forms.

Case Management — Young people have complex needs, but these may be profoundly different than those associated with adult homeless populations. A Housing First framework for youth must place client-centred case management at the centre of the work in order to organize and coordinate the delivery of services. For many young people, Housing First case management may also be delivered by smaller teams who help match the young person to the supports they need to obtain and maintain appropriate housing and that they access age appropriate supports to assist in their transition to adulthood and achieve an optimum quality of life developing plans, enhancing life skills, addressing health and mental health needs, engaging in meaningful activities and building social and community relations.



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