



# Introduction

**Y**oung adults with mental health needs face many challenges as they transition into adulthood and establish their own place in the community. A central mission in supporting community integration is to help young people find and maintain a living situation that is affordable, safe and available for as long as they wish to live there. In this report we summarize issues faced by transition-age youth and young adults with mental health conditions as they try to find and maintain stable housing. We then highlight practice, program, and policy options that appear to have promise for addressing this challenging area. We also provide an in-depth look at the programs and policies that currently control the availability of housing subsidies and public housing units and the impact of these policies on young adults.

This document is intended for individuals who are interested in developing ways to improve housing support for young adults as they transition into independent community living. This would include program administrators and planners in local or state mental health systems and policy leaders, as well as consumer-led organizations and other advocacy groups. This report will provide much of the background information and research that is needed to identify the desirable components for housing programs for young adults and, where available, the research that supports these components.

Two framing principles provided a structure for this document and are relevant to any consideration of housing issues for transition-age youth and young

adults with mental health concerns. The principle of “community integration” means that young people must have access to integrated community settings including housing, transportation, and leisure; along with community participation, defined as “belonging and contributing to chosen community contexts, access and ability to take part in self-determined activities in the community.”<sup>153</sup> Housing-relevant objectives related to community integration are that young people:

- Have a place to call home and be engaged in the community
- Have access to housing dispersed throughout the community that is not conditioned on compliance with treatment or a service plan<sup>152 p. 14</sup>

The second framing principle is self-determination, defined as “self-directed action to achieve personally valued goals.”<sup>115, p. 292</sup> Housing-relevant objectives related to self-determination are that young people:

- Have control over where they live
- Decide with whom they live and how they conduct their lives

Related to the principle of self-determination is our firm commitment to include the voices of youth and young adults as they speak about their experiences and opinions about what helps during transition. As part of our research, we conducted an extensive review of the literature that reported on qualitative studies conducted with young people about their transition experiences, preferences, helpful resources, and issues that were difficult or got in the way of progress. Ideally, we would have findings from a large research study

that examined a diverse array of young people from various parts of the country and focused specifically on their experience with obtaining and maintaining housing. Since this study does not exist, we extracted young peoples’ opinions about housing from studies that explored many aspects of transition.

We used multiple methods to identify the issues addressed in this report. We conducted a review of the research literature, including first-hand accounts of transition-age youth and young adults; we examined program literature and online information about housing issues, and we reviewed research and evaluation reports about housing. We also learned about issues facing young people and providers in transition programs through interviews with local, state-level, and federal personnel who are knowledgeable about housing issues and programs for youth and young adults with mental health challenges.

The primary focus of this document is transition-age youth and young adults with serious mental health conditions. However, when we began our literature review we found only a few studies that focused on young people with mental health concerns. Because many young people with mental health issues also have experience in the child welfare, juvenile justice, special education, or other systems, we expanded the review to include the voices of these young people as well. We also included literature addressing homelessness among youth and young adults because of the crossover among youth-serving systems and youth and young adults on the streets and because of the high incidence of mental health issues among youth who are homeless.<sup>5,61</sup>

This report has five sections. After this introductory section, in Section 2 we summarize some important contextual issues that are relevant to housing and transition-age youth who have had experience with the mental health, child welfare or juvenile justice systems. These issues include philosophy and approaches to providing housing, developmental issues related to transition-age young adults, cultural considerations, and the role of the family. In Section 3 we highlight

major themes extracted from studies of the perspectives of young people, followed by their implications for transition/housing practice, programming, and policy. A review of housing options designed to respond to the needs and preferences of youth and young adults is presented in Section 4, and in Section 5 we summarize our findings and present recommendations for next steps. We include program examples throughout the report.