

A photograph showing three young adults in a meeting. On the left, a young man with short dark hair, wearing a patterned short-sleeved shirt, is looking down with his hands clasped. In the center, a young woman with long dark hair, wearing a brown jacket, is speaking and looking towards the woman on the right. On the right, a young woman with long brown hair, wearing a light green top, is listening attentively. The background is a bright, modern office space with windows.

## Discussion and Recommendations

**A**s we reviewed the findings from the literature reviews and conversations with young adults, providers and other experts in the field of housing for transition-age youth, we reflected on how much we have learned and how much more there is to do.

Several areas stand out for us as worthy of attention in the effort to increase housing options for youth and young adults with mental health conditions. These include the immense contribution of the first-hand accounts by youth to our consideration of housing issues for young people, the neglect of cultural considerations in much of the housing literature, and how concepts of independence and interdependence interface with housing planning at the individual, program, and policy levels. They also include the issue of individualization and housing for transition-age youth, and the need to clarify expectations about housing outcomes at all levels. We conclude with recommendations for needed research and a discussion about housing issues for young people within the context of public policy.

### Value of Youth Perspectives

Our emphasis on youth voice as a way to frame many of the important issues related to transition and housing promotes a principle of children's mental health: "Youth are respected as strong voices and advocates in both their own care and in the systems created to care for them."<sup>91, p.28</sup> Youth MOVE National defines

youth voice as, “The engagement, representation and application of lived experience of young people in program and systems development and implementation.”<sup>159,p.3</sup> Our focus on youth perspectives is much more than a value statement, however. Reviewing the 50 research articles included in this report that document young people’s stories, preferences, and recommendations about transition re-affirmed our expectations that first-hand information from young adults would bring unique perspectives and valuable insights into the real time, real life experience of transition.

The themes we identified across the young people’s accounts included:

- *The sentiment of youth across many studies that “independence” seemed unrealistic* came alive when they shared their specific hopes, their fears, and their important ideas about how things might be different.
- The finding across several studies that *young people may both want help and support but also reject it* led to the identification of necessary work to be done in the areas of youth engagement, staff training, and policy review.
- *Wide-ranging views of program helpfulness and quality* helped to identify aspects of programming and staff relationships that were appreciated by youth and are also areas for review and attention. Notably, accounts from youth about *“mixed messages” that they should become self-reliant and independent while living with substantial program constraints* on their ability to make choices and to act on their decisions may help to stimulate ideas about possible practice and program improvements.
- *Support needs* identified by youth included emotional support, instrumental (practical) support,

and support in obtaining the information they needed. Many young people also identified ongoing supportive relationships as an important need;<sup>134</sup> this information may help to stimulate additional ideas about helping youth build lasting support systems into and beyond the transition period.

Because so few first-hand accounts of the transition and housing experiences of young people with mental health concerns are available in the published literature, more qualitative studies are needed to help build a foundation for further research.

## Cultural Issues and Housing Policy

Although the terms “street culture,” “peer culture,” “LGBTQ culture,” “recovery-oriented culture,” “high school culture,” and “agency/organizational culture” were all used in the literature to discuss the cultures that providers should consider when developing or adapting programs for young adults in transition, there was little attention to ethnic or cultural diversity and youth of color, or young people from families that were fairly recent immigrants except in a few studies that specifically focused on cultural issues.

Five studies had a substantial focus on issues of cultural diversity and/or identity.<sup>41,43,68,130,149</sup> Several other studies make specific mention of cultural considerations in theory building,<sup>89</sup> access to services,<sup>71</sup> and in measurement of youth connections with supportive adults.<sup>131</sup> Documents that include compilations of research findings and resources, such as The National Network for Youth<sup>146</sup> and Dion, et al.,<sup>33</sup> include discussions of culturally competent services related to housing.

The lack of specific consideration of culture in the studies involving youth with mental health concerns, young people currently or formerly in foster care, homeless youth, and young adults with disabilities may be partially explained by two phenomena: First, as Gone<sup>48</sup> observes, “...cultural practices comprise the almost invisible participation in shared thought and activity that need never be conscious since most people in the community are socialized into such routines.”<sup>48, p. 427</sup> Thus, young people may not be aware that their preferences for, or discomfort with, certain expectations or practices are culturally related unless they are engaged in conversations about their lives, families, and backgrounds, and without such information, important cultural issues may be unknown or ignored by staff.

system, or from a congregate care setting (mental health, juvenile justice, or child welfare) to a transitional housing setting or to independent community living. They may also be seeking or engaged in employment, entering a meaningful relationship, or becoming parents. Young adults in transition have very complicated lives with much to learn and accomplish, and cultural considerations for youth from non-dominant groups may be crowded out by what are seen by programs as more pressing issues. Because of the disproportionate representation of children and youth of color in many of the youth-serving systems and among homeless youth, however, cultural considerations should receive direct attention in transition services as they are likely to affect young people's opportunities, choices, and outcomes in transition, and beyond.

This does not necessarily suggest that additional programs must be developed to address cultural issues with youth and young adults. Young people in transition are diverse in many ways, and efforts to individualize transition planning and services can, by design, include attention to cultural issues. Schmidt et al.<sup>130</sup> suggest an approach they call “cultural humility” that helps staff move from the expectation that they must be experts and supports them to learn about each young person's culture directly from the youth themselves. This approach may require some additional training or re-training, but can be aligned with other individualized planning and service approaches such as Wraparound services.<sup>17,109,154</sup>

## Independence, Interdependence, and Housing Issues

The concepts of independence and interdependence are frequently presented as examples of major

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A second consideration that may contribute to insufficient attention to cultural issues is that many young people experience what Broad, Sandhu, Sunderji, and Charach<sup>15</sup> call “multiple, concurrent transitions.”<sup>15, p. 4</sup> Young people may be moving from a family home to a friend's couch, from the streets to shelters or housing, from foster care to “independent living,” from children's mental health services to the adult mental health

differences between individualistic and collective, or group-oriented cultures, and indeed, operating primarily within one or the other of these frameworks may be associated with young adults' choices and experiences during the transition period. Common examples have to do with whether or not young adults want to live with family or apart, and the degree to which they feel an obligation to contribute financially or to help with family tasks.<sup>42,54</sup> Raeff,<sup>118,119,120</sup> however, argues that all people are physically and mentally separate and simultaneously socially connected, and presents evidence that both independence and interdependence are valued in diverse cultures.<sup>120, p. 32</sup> This suggests that transition goals for all young adults should include building the skills needed to engage in interdependent and mutually beneficial relationships.

to live independently without considerable ongoing support.<sup>8,28,62,116</sup> These authors recommend working with youth while they are in care to build their relationship and collaboration skills. Related ideas about how to better prepare young people for transition call for helping young people build networks of supportive peers and adults who will help to provide consistent social, emotional, tangible, and informational support over time.<sup>9</sup> Suggested interventions include various mentoring approaches,<sup>50,51,98,147</sup> strengthening relationships with caregivers,<sup>96,143</sup> and programs such as Family Finding, a process for connecting or re-connecting foster youth with parents and extended family.<sup>10,80,84</sup>

## Addressing the Individual Housing Needs of Young People

As we have emphasized in this report, the ability to individualize services and to offer several different approaches to housing support is crucial if the needs and preferences of young people are to be met. Some young people prefer the predictability of living together with other young people while developing skills. Others feel they are ready to move into independent housing and want minimal help to navigate this path. Still other young people with mental health challenges want to live in a home setting as close to their family or foster home as possible. No single approach, even one based in housing first principles, will meet the needs of all young adults. Agencies that are developing or modifying their housing programs are advised to consider offering a range of options which include independent supported housing, transitional living programs and host homes.



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Many researchers and policy advisors concerned with disappointing transition outcomes have called for a shift from “independence” as a transition goal to “interdependence,” suggesting that it is unrealistic to expect that young adults who have spent considerable time in out-of-home placement (child welfare, mental health, or juvenile justice) will be prepared

## Recommendations for Needed Research

Published research about the effectiveness of various housing support programs specifically for young adults with mental health challenges is almost non-existent. Two of the studies noted in this report are analyses of data for a subgroup of young people extracted from a larger study of adults of all ages.<sup>45,79</sup> While this kind of sub-group analysis is useful, it only gives us insight into programs that were developed for adults and applied to young adults without modification. There is an urgent need to examine some of the housing options that are successful with adults (e.g., permanent supported housing) and elicit ideas from young people about how these approaches could be made more developmentally appropriate and consistent with their preferences. These modified housing options should then be tested with rigorous research designs.

Although transitional living programs have been in use for some time, their effectiveness has been assessed through a small number of studies.<sup>121,136</sup> Some transitional living programs have conducted evaluation; however, most suffer from poor follow-up rates leading to findings that are hard to interpret. A study of the effectiveness of transitional living programs for foster youth has been funded by the Administration for Children and Families with results available after 2019. Whether these programs adequately address the needs of young people with mental health challenges who are leaving their parents' homes should be examined.

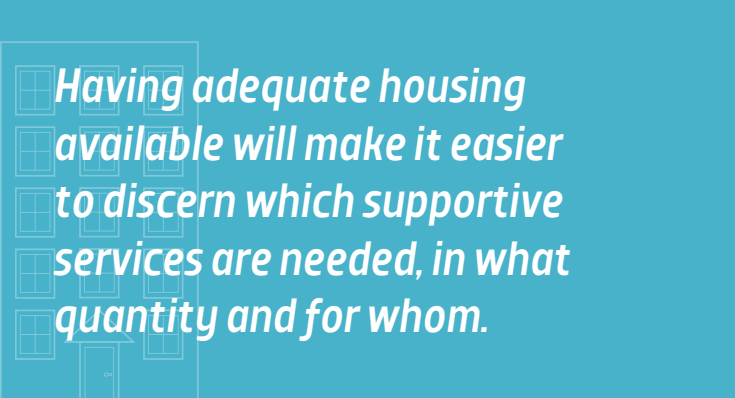
There is almost no research or evaluation available on the host home option. Most host homes are provided voluntarily by members of the community and services

of volunteers are almost never questioned or evaluated for effectiveness. Examination of host home programs (services that support youth living in host homes and their hosts) is rare, even though these programs are often supported by federal or state resources. A study of rural host homes reported difficulty with locating young people at follow-up, and unclear findings about outcomes.<sup>125</sup>

Two studies of supported housing include a subanalysis of data collected for young adults.<sup>45,79</sup> Kozloff reported that young adults were stably housed 65% of the time as compared to 31% in treatment as usual. Gilmer documents that those young people who received high-fidelity housing first supports showed a decline in the use of inpatient services and an increase in the use of outpatient services when compared to youth in low-fidelity housing first programs. In both studies, supported housing was provided to all adults in the same way; i.e., no modifications were made for young adults. Even more promising is Stable Homes, Brighter Futures, a program in California that provides supported housing specifically for young adults who are homeless and engaged in high-risk behaviors.<sup>24</sup> The interim evaluation findings for this program are promising. These three studies allow us to conclude that supported housing should be considered a viable option for young adults and that additional research is needed to determine what modifications might increase the fit between supported housing and young adults with mental health challenges.

In addition to conducting additional studies of the first-hand experiences of young adults with mental health conditions, there is a need for research involving young people across populations and service sectors.

Even though young people with mental health conditions may also be homeless, former foster youth, have had juvenile justice or adult corrections involvement, or have substance abuse problems, many current studies on transition-age youth and young adults have a singular focus on one system, or on a specific diagnostic or disability status. Many transition-age youth have multiple system experiences and face multiple personal challenges, and these experiences most likely affect what Collins and Curtis<sup>23</sup> call their “housing careers,” and may be directly related to whether they are able to get and maintain adequate housing.



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Finally, with a few exceptions,<sup>70,72</sup> research literature across the fields of mental health, child welfare, and juvenile justice does not reflect the perspectives of families on the transition process and housing issues in particular. There has been more research involving families' views in other disability fields such as health,<sup>65,128</sup> intellectual disabilities,<sup>67</sup> and in the broader area of family studies.<sup>57,85</sup> Research about the roles, perspectives, preferences, needs, and experiences of families whose children are challenged by mental health conditions is needed to fill this information gap.

## Defining Housing Outcomes for Youth and Young Adults

The most commonly used measures of housing program success are ones that were developed for housing programs for adults in general without considering whether these same measures should be used with young adults. For example, an outcome for adults such as “length of time in permanent housing” most likely has a different meaning for young people in transition. Most young people, with or without disabilities, live in multiple places during young adulthood and may well define “stable” in terms of the near future (e.g., “Can I stay here for the next few weeks or months without fear of being asked to leave?”). Other outcomes for young adults, such as the size of their social networks, quality of living or level of community integration may be better indicators of the effectiveness of a housing program. Young people with mental health disorders have not yet been involved in the conversation about what constitutes a successful outcome for a housing support program. Until their voices are included in the conversation about what constitutes success in housing, we will continue to offer programs that may or may not meet their needs and preferences.

## Public Policy Context

Focusing solely on the effectiveness of housing support programs may encourage us to overlook and fail to address larger social issues. Most of the services provided to young people in housing programs focus on building skills in the individual or increasing their “housing readiness.” Preoccupation with building young persons' skills to live independently (or their ability to remain sober or take their medications) overlooks



the larger structural challenges that are present. Most studies did not measure the effect of public policy or other system-level issues that contribute to housing challenges for all young adults, although several authors mention this as a concern.<sup>73,105,144</sup> Katz, Zerger & Hwang<sup>75</sup> provide an interesting example of the dampening effect that successful programs may have on the larger social conversation. They argue that while the impact of housing first type programs on the housing status of program participants has “received considerable scientific and public consideration, less attention has been paid to its effects on societal conversations related to housing, public services, and social justice.”<sup>75</sup> p.139 It is easy to slip into the belief that an effective housing approach, if provided in great enough supply, will solve the complex web of social conditions that lead to poverty and homelessness.

Perhaps the most obvious public policy issues are the lack of affordable housing and the high unemployment and low wages associated with entry level jobs typically available to young people, challenges that affect all young adults and many adults who live on low incomes. There are many societal factors that contribute to the lack of affordable housing. These include gentrification, governmental policies about investing in affordable housing and lack of incentives for the private housing market. Similarly, high unemployment among young adults and the low wages and lack of benefits in many of the jobs available

to them are symptoms of a larger and complex public policy problem. The power imbalance between those who control much of the wealth in this country and those who need help continues to overshadow the fact that many young people live on the streets and do not have enough food. Combined with the relative lack of education and job experience among young people with mental health challenges, this results in unemployment or employment in low-wage jobs for most of them. These young people often do not receive income supplements, may be without health insurance and must compete for the limited social and health services that are available.

First steps to addressing the housing needs of young adults with mental health disorders are to increase the amount of affordable housing that is available and make it possible for young adults to access it. Newman and Goldman<sup>105</sup> suggest that having adequate housing available will make it easier to discern which supportive services are needed, in what quantity and for whom. Some useful guidance for designing and delivering services for transitioning youth and young adults is provided by Holtschneider.<sup>62</sup> Reflecting on her research with homeless youth, she suggests, “Housing is critical, but not enough; young people value services that invest holistically and authentically in nurturing their development and future goals while simultaneously building a community of support and culture of belonging that will endure.”<sup>62, p.160</sup>