

Meeting the Grand Challenge to End Homelessness

Ending Youth Homelessness

Policy Recommendations

- Designate funding to increase access, availability, and appropriateness of housing supports for youth and young adults.
- Adopt or update current laws to promote access to comprehensive services for minor youth.
- Fund pilots of innovative solutions that address youth homelessness in real-world contexts.

Issue

Approximately 3.5 million people under the age of 25 lack a regular, fixed, and adequate nighttime residence in the U.S.—including young people who are couch surfing or “doubling up”, sleeping in shelters or other institutional settings, or sleeping outside.¹ Before becoming homeless, many young people experience trauma, such as family abuse and neglect or living with an adult caregiver who faces mental illness or substance misuse.² Young people who hold marginalized identities and experiences—such as LGBTQ young people, young people of color, and those with a history of foster care or juvenile justice involvement—are more likely to be overrepresented in homeless service systems.^{3, 4, 5, 6}

There is a critical need for interventions and policies that meet the developmental needs of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness who are seeking independence and support amidst chronic neglect from structures and systems that have largely failed to support them.^{7, 8} These interventions and policies should be crafted with the goal of making housing options more accessible and flexible to meet the unique needs of youth.

To promote better outcomes for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness, we recommend three state-level policy interventions.

Policy Recommendations

1. Designate funding to increase access, availability, and appropriateness of housing supports for youth and young adults.

Existing funding to address homelessness often comes with restrictions that provide a narrow scope that limits who can be served. This results in (1) limited access to housing supports for youth and young adults; (2) barriers for organizations seeking to design, implement, and evaluate innovative housing program models to serve youth; and (3) services that are unable to meet the holistic needs of youth. We call on states to develop solutions to meet the unique developmental needs of youth and young adults, rather than serving them through adult services focused primarily on housing support.

Promising Approach: Virginia

In Virginia, the state legislature funds the Virginia Housing Trust Fund, up to 20% of which can be used to fund efforts to reduce homelessness.⁹ Virginia designated a portion of this fund to support applications for Underserved Populations Innovation Project grants. Youth have been identified as an underserved population in the state, and the grant has expanded the definition of homelessness for funded projects to be inclusive of the Department of Education definition, which includes temporarily staying with others (i.e., doubling up) due to economic hardship or housing loss. This grant mechanism supports planning efforts, including expenses required to engage youth and young adults with lived expertise in the design and leadership of innovative initiatives to meet the needs of youth experiencing homelessness.

2. Adopt or update current laws to promote access to comprehensive services for minor youth.

Over 700,000 minor youth (ages 13-17) experience homelessness (MYEH) in the U.S. each year.¹⁰ Experiencing homelessness at a younger age can have significant, long-term adverse impacts on development, physical and mental health, and overall well-being. Yet, MYEH wait longer to access services, including housing, than their young adult peers.¹¹ One barrier is the inability for MYEH to provide consent for their own housing and services, such as healthcare, and to sign contracts for themselves. Most states have statutes allowing MYEH to be emancipated to access needed services; however, these require legal procedures that are prohibitively burdensome to MYEH and are often limited to one specific service, such as housing.

We call for all states to adopt or update current laws to promote access to comprehensive services among MYEH through policies that develop a clear yet flexible pathway for MYEH to be verified as qualified minors allowed to:

- Open bank accounts, sign for loans, and request financial aid;
- Consent for medical care and procedures, including mental health treatment;

- Sign themselves into education programs, housing, residential shelters, and other supportive services; and
- Access public benefits, such as SNAP.

Promising Approach: Missouri

In Missouri, legislation has been updated to reflect these practices (Rev Stat §431.056 in 2000 and HB 1414 in 2020). Missouri's qualified minor statute allows homeless service providers and McKinney Vento school liaisons, in addition to parents or guardians, to provide documentation verifying MYEH for a qualified minor status. This status allows qualified MYEH to enter contracts for services critical to their independent living needs. The Missouri Balance of State Continuum of Care and its member agency, Flourish Initiative, have operationalized this into a qualified minor verification form training for providers to promote access to services.¹² Missouri's statute, and the community-based efforts to address youth homelessness via the statute, can serve as a model for other states.

3. Fund pilots of innovative solutions that address youth homelessness in real-world contexts.

In addition to funding for housing programs tailored specifically for youth (Recommendation 1), additional funding is needed to foster cross-system collaboration and innovative solutions to address youth homelessness across contexts. Funding to test innovative solutions in real-world contexts may provide important lessons and can build upon existing examples of state and federal investments to address the holistic needs of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness.

We call on states to invest in promising pilot projects that (1) integrate research and program evaluation to understand the impact of cross-system collaboration in creating access and connection to housing, school, workforce training and development, and health care; (2) engage youth and young adults with lived expertise; and (3) have flexibility to waive requirements, such as aspects of eligibility or performance reporting.

For instance, Performance Partnership Pilots for Disconnected Youth (P3) is a federal program that allowed grantees to blend or braid existing federal funding streams to improve systems serving disconnected youth. Lessons learned from the national evaluation of P3 suggest the need for dedicated planning time to understand existing supports to be enhanced, technical assistance to understand federal regulations, guidance on blending or

braiding funding, and time to build project infrastructure (like data sharing systems), identify needs, and put into action a plan for systems change.¹³

Promising Approach: Texas

The State of Texas has invested in the Bexar County Fostering Educational Success (BCFES) Project, which brought together education, child welfare, and housing agencies to address the holistic needs of young adult students with a history of foster care. This cross-system collaboration set the foundation for additional federal funding for youth-focused housing solutions, recognizing the critical need to address housing and overall stability as part of educational goals and providing a model for state investments that can be leveraged for further financial support.¹⁴ We suggest other states fund similar pilot programs focused on flexible funding and holistic housing solutions for youth and young adults.

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About the Grand Challenges for Social Work

The Grand Challenges for Social Work was launched by the American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare in 2016 to harness the ingenuity, expertise, dedication, and creativity of individuals and organizations within the field of social work and beyond to champion “social progress powered by science.” Additional information on the Grand Challenges may be found at GrandChallengesforSocialWork.org.

Notes

¹ Morton et al. (2018).

² Combs et al. (2020).

³ Aceves et al. (2020).

⁴ Britton & Pilnik (2018).

⁵ Dworksy et al. (2019).

⁶ Maccio & Ferguson (2016).

- ⁷ Morton et al. (2018).
- ⁸ Dworsky et al. (2019).
- ⁹ Department of Housing and Community Development (n.d.)
- ¹⁰ Morton et al. (2018).
- ¹¹ Hsu et al. (2021).
- ¹² Missouri Balance of State Continuum of Care (2022).
- ¹³ Rosenberg et al. (2021).
- ¹⁴ Bexar County (2023).

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