



## **Youth Services Network**

***Responding to Youth Homelessness –  
So all youth experience safety, stability, and opportunity***  
February 2021

### **Introduction and Overview of Youth Homelessness and the HYA**

#### **Racism and Racial Disparities**

White supremacy, racism, and systematic inequities have persistently impacted Indigenous, African American, and youth of color for centuries. The past year, 2020, increased the visibility of racial and systemic injustices.

Wilder Research reports that 73% of Minnesota youth experiencing homelessness are youth of color. Systemic racism directly affects the physical health, mental well-being, and daily lives of youth and families experiencing homelessness. Youth have been directly impacted by the public uprising for racial justice and our collective community trauma related to the pandemic. This has only perpetuated trauma within many young peoples' lives.

Societal, institutional, systematic and policy change must happen. As leaders within our communities, we have a responsibility to address the impacts of racism and systematic oppression. We call upon decision makers to implement more inclusive policies and institutional practices that reduce racial and health disparities.

The Youth Services Network is committed to addressing racial disparities, a vital component to the root causes leading to and reproducing youth becoming homeless and a legacy of trauma as well as poverty. As service providers, we know and understand these disparities and our work with youth is a testimony to the difference that can be made in the lives of our future generations who have been impacted by systemic racism. As youth serving agencies working with Minnesota's marginalized young people, who disproportionately represent communities of color, we urge policy makers to centralize the short and long-term impacts of the systematic racism and intergenerational trauma as you make policy. We encourage policy makers to join us in eliminating the barriers that keep racial and health disparities entrenched.

The following pages provides concrete steps for the Minnesota Legislature to address systemic racism and its impact on youth experiencing homelessness. Legislative language, administrative rules, and requests for proposals should all reflect a commitment to addressing and eliminating systemic racism and uplifting our young people, who are the future of our communities.

## Overview of Youth Experiencing Homelessness

The Minnesota State Legislature has made a significant impact in the lives of thousands of young people through strategic investment in the Homeless Youth Act over the past decade. Services have been developed and enhanced statewide. Youth workers, service experts, and community leaders are collaborating effectively to meet the needs of resilient youth in challenging circumstances. Homeless youth service providers offer intensive services to support each individual youth in identifying their path to personal stability, positive relationships, and a hopeful sense of the future.

Fundamentally, homeless youth services are a multi-disciplinary response to the needs of adolescents who are experiencing traumatic disruption to their developmental journey. Supports offered by homeless youth serving agencies go far beyond outreach, drop-in, housing and meeting basic needs. Providers worked with the University of Minnesota to identify evidence-based principles and practices that effectively support youth in overcoming homelessness.<sup>1</sup> Following these principles, providers offer an intensive array of services, framed through a positive youth development lens, in order to help young people move beyond crisis to stability and consideration of their futures.

Agencies that support youth experiencing homelessness exist because young people need youth-specific interventions. The housing goals of the adult and family housing field are not sufficient to meet the developmental needs of youth and young adults. Services respond to unique youth strengths, needs, and, are oriented to developmental milestones and adolescent experiences. Values of intensive youth development include:

- Targeted, timely interventions for disconnected youth;
- Services based on demonstrated need (as opposed to requiring crisis to be achieved to meet eligibility criteria);
- Investment in youth yields future stability at the personal and community levels; and
- All youth are deserving – complex youth merit attention, investment, and the belief from collaborating systems that, with appropriate supports, youth can achieve their goals.

Youth-serving agencies, throughout the state of Minnesota, provide a continuum of services to meet the unique and complex needs of youth experiencing homelessness, with the goal of ensuring that their experiences are brief and non-recurring, as well as creating intentional services to prevent youth from experiencing future episodes of homelessness.

Despite the significant gains made in responding to the crisis of youth homelessness, due to a number of factors the number of youth who are homeless on their own continues to increase. The most recent analysis conducted by Wilder Research indicates that on any given night 6,000 youth across the state experience homelessness and do not have a safe place to sleep.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Homeless Youth Collaborative on Development Evaluation, “9 Evidence-Based Guiding Principles to Help Youth Overcome Homelessness,” University of Minnesota, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> “Homelessness in Minnesota: Findings from the 2018 Statewide Homeless Study,” Wilder Research, September 2018.

The following white paper leverages the insights of the field - professional observations, supported by analysis and data – and offers solutions proposed by Minnesota’s homeless youth service providers. Through a review of root causes, upstream opportunities, system alignment, and immediate solutions, this paper presents a high-level road map for state leaders as partners in the shared pursuit of assuring stability, opportunity and hope for all of Minnesota’s youth.

## I. **Assessing today’s challenges – Root Causes of Youth Experiences of Homelessness**

- **Poverty.** Young people experiencing homelessness are confronted not only with individual or nuclear family impoverishment, rather, their entire network (extended family, kin and community) can lack the social and economic capital to prevent and end homelessness and meet the needs of young people in crisis.
- **Racism, Homophobia and Transphobia.** Wilder Research reports that 73% of Minnesota youth experiencing homelessness are youth of color even though youth of color make up only 26% of Minnesota’s total youth population.<sup>3</sup> Research from the University of Chicago indicates that LGBTQIA youth have a 120% higher risk of becoming homeless.<sup>4</sup> Racism and homophobia also contribute significantly to factors that lead to impoverishment of individuals and communities.
- **Affordable Housing Crisis.** The average income in Minnesota has not kept up with increases in housing costs. People in lower income brackets are disproportionately cost-burdened when it comes to housing.<sup>5</sup>
- **Trauma.** Youth experiencing poverty, homelessness, racism and homophobia are dealing with significant trauma. Studies have shown that youth experiencing homelessness experience trauma such as child abuse and neglect, sexual and physical assault and sex trafficking at higher rates than their non-homeless peers. When that trauma is not recognized and dealt with, it can lead to mental health issues, juvenile crime and/or substance abuse.
- **Mental Healthcare.** Minnesota does not have a mental health continuum that effectively meets the needs of youth, let alone youth experiencing homelessness. The most recent Wilder study reports that 57% of homeless youth are experiencing serious mental health challenges and 36% have chronic physical health problems.<sup>6</sup> Of these mental health issues, anxiety or panic disorders are the most common at 37% of all youth.<sup>7</sup> This report also states that 19% of youth have reported symptoms of a traumatic brain injury and that 13% have reported a disorder involving drug or alcohol abuse.<sup>8</sup>
- **Racial Disparities.** Youth experiencing homelessness may engage in livability crimes and due to the multiple factors that lead to significant racial disparities in the justice system, youth of color who disproportionally experience homelessness are at higher risk of getting arrested and ending up in a trend of incarceration for youth of color often referred to as the “school to prison pipeline.”

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<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> “Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America,” Chapin Hall, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Gabriela Norton and Atticus Jaramillo, “State of the State’s Housing 2017,” Minnesota Housing Partnership, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> “Homelessness in Minnesota: Findings from the 2018 Statewide Homeless Study,” Wilder Research, September 2018.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

- **Sexual exploitation.** Homelessness is substantial risk factor for becoming sexually exploited and/or trafficked and sexual exploitation can also be a risk factor for homelessness. One in five homeless youth are criminally sexually exploited,<sup>9</sup> and providers within the homeless youth field observe that a great majority of homeless youth fall prey to those who use their housing instability and clear vulnerability to take advantage of them. These experiences create an additional level of trauma for youth to overcome.
- **Systems Failures.** Systems are inflexible and are not built to be responsive to the needs of youth and families. County systems can operate in ways that create barriers for youth to access resources. In addition, counties operate independently and do not apply resources consistently to youth, creating significant geographic inconsistencies.
- **Transition Planning.** Lack of planned transitions from systems (corrections, foster care, mental health) can leave youth without needed stability in housing, relationships, or income.
- **Lack of Capacity and Support for Diverse Leaders.** Relevant fields for youth throughout their lifespan are absent of leaders from communities of color who bring a level of cultural competence and who signal to youth the potential they have to seek leadership roles in their futures.

Systemic reforms are foundational requirements for Minnesota to achieve its goal of eliminating the prolonged crisis of youth homelessness. We also know system reform is long-term work, and takes investment, engagement, and leadership from multiple sectors. However, more immediate shifts in existing systems, accompanied by targeted investments, can impact youth access to safety, stability and opportunity – and in doing so decrease the incidence of youth homelessness.

## II. Opportunities for Upstream Prevention from and/or Diversion out of Youth Homelessness

Effective prevention strategies support families and communities to keep youth safe where they are or support youth when experiencing a crisis. We know the presence of caring adults and targeted resources create the stability, safety and access to supports needed to prevent youth homelessness. Many identified prevention strategies are already in stages of implementation, at statewide or community levels, and include:

- **Family Supports** – culturally competent and family driven (defined as responding to needs identified by the family and work to overcome barriers and provide supportive services), rather than systems driven. Services include parenting education and support, crisis nurseries, high fidelity wrap around models, services geared to achieving family reunification (when safe and possible), mediation, kinship connection and resources, *Safe Families*<sup>10</sup>, and additional access to resources for parents to address mental health/substance abuse/barriers to parenting.

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<sup>9</sup> Greene et al., 1999 & Halcon & Lifson, 2004

<sup>10</sup> Safe Families for Children can temporarily host children (0-18) and provide a network of support to families in crisis while they get back on their feet to avoid involvement with the child welfare system. A nationally known non-profit addressing prevention and early intervention to keep children safe and families intact.

- **Community Support and Reform for the Child Welfare System** – responses like the *Connected Kids Initiative*<sup>11</sup>, and, *Quality Parenting Initiative-MN*<sup>12</sup> can enhance community capacity to address challenges for children, youth and families, and by doing so fundamentally prevent greater future crisis through skill and relationship building. Additionally, numerous reforms under discussion at statewide levels are needed to target supports for family preservation, enhance capacity to assure safety, and provide the community services across the continuum to meet family needs and prevent child welfare involvement.
- **Support for Youth Aging out of Care** – ensuring transition plans are established and next step housing is secured before youth are transitioned out of all placements to independent living or family reunification (foster care, corrections, mental health, etc.).
- **Community Based Investments** – investment in recreational centers and other neighborhood hubs that can provide critical supports to families and youth before situations escalate to homelessness.
- **Outreach** – utilizing predictive analysis and research sources, including the Adverse Childhood Experiences and other related data can deepen outreach strategies to identify and respond to early risk factors for youth and families.
- **Systems Inclusion** – require that social workers, foster care providers, service providers etc. successfully complete cultural competency and LGBTQIA trainings and, on an ongoing basis, follow best practices expectations regarding working with culturally diverse youth and families and LGBTQIA youth.
- **Economic Supports** – prevent crisis, and keep families housed and economically stable. Examples of these include increased MFIP grants, eviction prevention programs, and livable wage.

In addition to seeking upstream solutions, there are creative ways to include youth and leverage opportunities for youth to benefit and engage in other initiatives and areas of state government.

### III. System Alignment and Intervention – Opportunities and Concepts

#### Opportunities:

- Minnesota’s Federal System of Care Grant to address children’s mental health should identify youth experiencing homelessness as a specific population to include in the implementation of this federally-supported statewide system reform.

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<sup>11</sup> The Connected Kids Initiative (CKI) is a collaborative approach to supporting children and families by raising awareness of the continuum of child welfare needs from prevention/early intervention, to foster care/adoption, and transition age youth support, CKI gives community members an opportunity to support families and youth all along the continuum such as recruiting foster parents and host families, as well as resourcing families with a support network. CKI first builds capacity in a county/region to recruit for homes across the spectrum of child welfare to “lighten the load” of providers. As capacity is built and enough homes are recruited, we support the county child protection office with alternative pathways to consider for prevention and transitioning youth.

<sup>12</sup> QPI-MN is a collaborative movement to improve foster care by focusing on improving connections, skills and relationships for the child’s family of origin, foster parents, and youth in foster care. This is done by coordinating state, county and private agency engagement to effectively hear the caregivers voice, that leads support and wrap around each child and family unit(s).

- Include unique needs of youth experiencing homelessness in Family First Prevention Services Act planning and implementation for Minnesota by prioritizing newly Title IV-E reimbursable services on early intervention and prevention strategies for youth.
- Support and build momentum around initiatives that drive system alignment and improvements (eg: *Minor Connect*<sup>13</sup> and *Safe Harbor No Wrong Door Initiative*<sup>14</sup>).
- Support a federal change to the Low Income Housing Tax Credit so that youth living in LIHTC-funded facilities can engage in full time education, as accessing housing in those units currently prohibits the resident from being enrolled in full time high school or college.
- In this time of great need for workforce development across the state, youth who have experienced homelessness and the providers who support them to success should be encouraged to partner with state funded employment efforts. Joint strategies should be developed with DEED to target this population and experts who work in this field to create the circumstances that yield success for youth in short and long-term employment and career development.
- Align eligibility to services with youth need – with a more upstream approach versus requiring that youth demonstrate homelessness to access needed support.

#### **IV. 2021 Opportunities – seeing and meeting youth needs**

The Wilder Research data from the 2018 Statewide Survey on Homelessness shows that on any given night in Minnesota an estimated 4,876 unaccompanied youth experience homelessness, a number that has great validity and is often seen as a conservative likely undercount of youth specifically. The Wilder count identifies 1,659 youth aged 17 and under and 3,217 youth 18-24, and within that data a group of 1,560 youth who are also parenting. Over the course of a full year the same study found that 13,300 unaccompanied youth experience homelessness across the state of Minnesota. This represents a sizable crisis for youth within our state.

#### **Current Statewide Capacity versus Current Need**

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<sup>13</sup> Minor Connect is an alternative child welfare response for older adolescents, and a collaboration between the Department of Human Services (DHS), tribal human services, Hennepin County and nonprofit youth service providers. The goal is to create a dynamic response for youth ages 15-17 who are at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness by ensuring that when a young persons' housing situation creates the potential for significant harm and risk, the County can offer a specific response attuned to the needs of older minors. The county child welfare system works in partnership with homeless youth service providers in the community who provided on-going support and housing services specific to this target population. Minor Connect is a two-year pilot, with robust data collection, to inform a dynamic systemic response that can be replicated statewide.

<sup>14</sup> The Safe Harbor/No Wrong Door Response for Sexually Exploited and/or Trafficked Youth was a reform made with the passing of the 2011 Safe Harbor Law. Prior to the passing of the Safe Harbor Law youth victims of sexual exploitation and/or trafficking if found by law enforcement could be arrested and charged with prostitution crimes and placed in juvenile detention with no access to trauma informed services and supports to help them heal. The Safe Harbor Law decriminalized "prostitution" for youth under the age of 18 and provides a new coordinated state-wide response that is trauma informed and victim centered for youth who have experienced sexual exploitation and trafficking. It is a multi-disciplinary response that includes child welfare and juvenile justice systems, law enforcement, county attorney's offices, health care, legal services, and providers of emergency shelter, housing and services. The majority of the service, shelter and housing providers that are a part of the Safe Harbor-No Wrong Door Response also are providers of homeless youth programming.

To address this immediate need and crisis of lacking access to the safety and stability that basic shelter and housing can afford to youth, Minnesota requires significant new capacity for shelter, transitional living, street outreach, drop in centers, emergency shelter and all youth housing opportunities.

<b>Current Statewide Capacity</b>	<b>Need &amp; Cost<sup>15</sup></b>
111 shelter beds	Based on the assumption that 80% of youth need access emergency shelter and 20% of youth are able to “self resolve” after couch hopping, etc. There is a 4,694 gap on any given night of youth statewide who do not currently have access to safe shelter. Cost - \$428,327,550 per year.
734 housing units <sup>16</sup> – including site based transitional and scattered site	Studies have shown that between 40-50% of youth staying in emergency shelter are able to safely reunify with a family member or adult caregiver. We estimate that of the 80% of the 6,000 youth who need shelter (4,694), 50% of these youth won’t need housing after receiving shelter programming. This leaves 2,347 youth needing housing. If we currently have 704 units of housing, we need an additional 1,643 units of housing. Cost - \$38,610,500 per year.
Street Outreach Workers in Bemidji, Brainerd, Duluth, Mankato, Minneapolis, Rochester, St Paul, Willmar, and counties of Anoka, Dakota, Scott/Carver and Washington.  and  Drop-In Centers in Anoka, Apple Valley, Bemidji, Bloomington, Duluth, Hopkins, Mankato, Minneapolis, Northfield, St Cloud, St Paul and Willmar	With the assumption that all youth experiencing homelessness need triage and early intervention support that is most easily accessed through an outreach worker and/or drop-in center, Minnesota needs to add 88 sites with two-person teams so that all Minnesota Counties and Reservations have one Street Outreach Team/Program and related drop-in resource. Cost - \$22,000,000/year.
	Total Cost - \$488,938,050 (\$977,876,100/biennium)

<sup>15</sup> Average costs for emergency shelter for youth/young family is \$250/day, housing for youth/young families is \$64.34/day, operating a two person outreach/drop-in center is \$250,000/year.

<sup>16</sup> MN DHS Homeless Youth Act count of current services.

With the understanding that to fully address the crisis needs of Minnesota’s youth experiencing homelessness would require almost \$1 billion biennial investment, the YSN proposes just an additional \$10 million to be added to the base for the current Homeless Youth Act over the 2022/2023 biennium.

### **Homeless Youth Act – invest in the continuum, innovation and targeting:**

The Homeless Youth Act defines a vital continuum of services, all needed to help support youth to access, engage and sustain the unique level of service need they have – until they have achieved stability needed to proceed into their hopeful futures. The continuum reflects specific areas of service, all staffed with the capacity to support youth to build and sustain relationships with caring adults who can support them along their journey.

Current state investment in the Homeless Youth Act yields the following youth served between July 1, 2019 through June 30, 2020: Drop-in Centers: 5,641, Street Outreach: 5,206, Youth Shelter: 597 unduplicated, Housing (Transitional and Permanent Supportive): 980 unduplicated.<sup>17</sup>

### **A prudent investment in what works – the MN Homeless Youth Act Continuum includes:**

- **Street Outreach** – meeting youth where they are, helping meet immediate need and building relationships to help identify how to best resolve their housing or related crisis.
  - **Drop-in Centers** – resources, support to assess and meet needs, and locations where youth can obtain safety and next steps for housing and life stability.
  - **Youth Shelter** – safe housing, case management, and support to transition to sustainable housing.
  - **Transitional Housing** – time limited housing opportunities designed to support youth to stabilize, establish education, employment, and other life plans.
  - **Permanent Supportive Housing** – designed for youth with significant barriers to have the stability needed to address life challenges while achieving progress on established life goals.
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- **Innovation – Mobile case management:** In order to provide service to youth prior to housing, during transitions, and as a vital after-care response. This service will be targeted for expansion to include aftercare as a vital and eligible service for the HYA continuum and will benefit from increased appropriation.
  - **Innovation – Prioritize, pilot and target support for young families:** Housing models that support healthy birth to early childhood for youth who are parenting and investment in effective practices that build parenting skills and stabilize young families. By deploying

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<sup>17</sup> Numbers from the MN Department of Human Services, Office of Economic Opportunity 2020.

a two-generational approach, you are increasing opportunities to end generational poverty and homelessness.

### **System Reforms – Eliminating Barriers:**

- **Access to Vital Documents:** Housing, Employment, and Education – all of these developmental milestones require documents that youth experiencing homelessness often do not have within reach. Instead, youth are often caught in a series of expectations that to access a social security card, a birth certificate is needed, and to access a birth certificate, state identification is needed. These barriers can be eliminated as other states have implemented, by allowing homeless youth who have a letter from a provider or county asserting their need, to access a certified copy of their birth certificate, provided by the Minnesota county where they were born, and to have support to access other vital documents as needed.
- **Shelter-Linked Mental Health Grants:** This innovation replicates the effective practices seen in the School-Linked Mental Health Grants to bring mental health supports onsite and invest in the individual needs of youth for mental health care, while also equipping the wider shelter/housing environment with skills to help care for youth with mental health needs.
- **Training and Systems Alignment Taskforce:** Meeting the unique needs of youth experiencing homelessness is possible throughout state systems – once youth needs have been seen, defined, and have appropriate responses. A State Systems Taskforce should be identified with membership from all related areas of state government (MDE, MDH, DEED, DHS, DOC, and Higher Education) so that relevant areas can receive training and tools to align existing resources and access points to see and respond to the unique needs, opportunities and strengths of this important population.
- **Capital Investment – Nonprofit Housing Bonds for Youth Shelter and Housing**  
Important work to end homelessness for all populations has directed the great majority of capital investment at all levels to permanent housing, operating from a theory of change that suggests that permanent solutions, not temporary solutions, are the approaches that will truly end homelessness for all. This theory does not have the same resonance for youth. Most youth served in Minnesota’s homeless youth continuum are in the midst of significant development – including transition between significant life stages related to how youth grow step by step into adulthood in our wider culture. What homeless youth services provide to young people experiencing a housing crisis are the stability and, most importantly, the relationships needed to create safety and foundational stability to develop and take steps toward their life plan. Taking all of this into account, it is vitally important that services reflect the needs of youth – instead of suggesting that they need a permanent housing solution. Capital investment in these vital youth services is needed, specifically:
  - **Shelter** is a necessary part of the homeless youth service continuum. Shelter is often a first step for youth, and becomes a place of refuge and opportunity to gain the necessary support and direction to take the next step. Additional youth

shelter is needed to protect and support youth to move them toward long-term stability.

- **Transitional housing** for youth is reflective of the transitional nature of adolescence. Youth experiencing homelessness, just like their peers in the wider culture, experience frequent transition through regular change in employment, education, and personal interests that propel them along in their journey.

## Conclusion

Of all Minnesotans in housing crisis, youth are the most likely to rely on couch hopping and informal supports that often increase youth vulnerabilities, and creates a larger chance for them to become sexually exploited and/or sex trafficked, victimized by other crimes and/or forced to engage in livability crimes. With this understanding, the State Legislature has invested in a continuum of crisis and stabilization supports for youth in the Homeless Youth Act that includes: street outreach, drop-in centers, shelter, and transitional and non-time limited supportive housing.

Tremendous support has been provided in Minnesota to develop a comprehensive plan for responding to youth homelessness however, more work remains.

The 2021 Legislative Session affords great opportunity to provide targeted investment in what works, address barriers to stability, and intervene effectively in significant mental health needs, specifically, recommending:

***An additional \$10 million added to the base per biennium for the Homeless Youth Act.***

With this investment, Minnesota will continue to make significant strides in developing the crisis intervention, stability, opportunity, and hope that we believe all youth need to be the productive citizens, professionals, and loving neighbors, colleagues and family members.