California Coalition for Youth

Ending Youth Homelessness: A Neuro-informed Approach

LARKIN STREET YOUTH SERVICES

LOS ANGELES LGBT CENTER

the Y

Executive Summary

California had the largest population of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness on a single night in January 2018. The scope of the issue validates the need for programs that guide youth in increasing their capacity to limit reliance on resource-intensive public systems and build self-sufficiency.

Many vulnerable youth, including those experiencing homelessness, are at a disadvantage in transitioning to adulthood when they must navigate the all complexities of adulthood without the relationships that help increase stability and well-being. Fortunately, a critical phase of brain development that occurs in young adulthood allows youth to learn the behaviors that build strong relationships and increase resilience in the face of trauma and disconnection.

The unique nature of a youth's homeless experience, coupled with this window of neurological opportunity, demonstrates the need for tailored services, separate from adult-serving systems, that seek to end youth homelessness in an intentional way.

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California's Challenge

California had the largest population of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness on a single night in January 2018. This population of 12,396 youth accounts for 33% of all unaccompanied youth in the nation. In terms of unsheltered youth, California accounted for 54% of all unsheltered homeless unaccompanied youth (9,920 people). The state of Washington is in a distant second place with eight percent of the nation's unsheltered unaccompanied youth, or 1,421 people.[i] There are another 2,292 parenting youth and their children experiencing homelessness.[ii]

Taken alone, the numbers are troubling, and the fact that they are an underestimation adds further urgency to the crisis. In spite of continued to efforts to improve youth counts, methods remain imprecise and do not typically align with the way youth experience homelessness, which is often hidden as opposed to being on the streets as seen in adults.

While every homeless experience varies, recent research from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago found that certain groups of young people are more likely to experience homelessness based on specific characteristics. Youth without a high school diploma or GED had a 346% higher risk of experiencing homelessness compared to their peers who graduated. Unmarried parenting youth had a 200% higher risk, youth identifying as LGBTQ+ had a 120% higher risk, and African-American youth had an 83% higher risk.[iii]

These factors demonstrate the need for programs that guide youth in identifying and maintaining support systems that replace reliance on resource-intensive public systems and build self-sufficiency, economic stability, and overall well-being.

Services for youth experiencing homelessness are impacted, and research found the average wait time for a youth looking for any type of housing is 4.5 months. Every day of waiting for housing services reduces a youth's chances of staying stably housed by 2%.[iv] In spite of obstacles and a lack of available resources, vulnerable and disconnected youth are resilient when offered access to the proper supports.

Youth are at a different phase of life than adults, so interventions aimed at adults will not produce the same results in youth. This mirrors the experience of homeless veterans, who have different needs than the mainstream population and require tailored services to end their homeless experience. According to the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, action from government at all levels and across sectors has resulted in multiple communities across 30 states (like Virginia, Delaware and Connecticut) that have been able to significantly reduce the number of veterans experiencing homeless to almost zero. A coordinated effort that unites public officials, cross-sector partners, and community-based organizations in delivering services that meet a subpopulation's specific needs will positively impact efforts to end the nation's homelessness crisis. A similar commitment, targeted to youth experiencing homelessness, will pay dividends when those youth realize their potential to live healthy lives and contribute to their communities.

To reduce the number of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness, the state must allocate resources to services that address youth-specific needs and incorporate trauma-informed care, positive youth development, and evidence-informed practice.

Relationships and the Young Adult Brain

The brain is designed to be social, and humans need relationships and a sense of belonging to thrive.[v] The absence of relationships negatively impacts brain development, health, and wellbeing.[vi] Many vulnerable youth, including those experiencing homelessness, navigate the complexities of adulthood without the relationships necessary to maintain stability and are at a disadvantage in transitioning to adulthood. With fractured families, strained educational histories, insufficient financial resources, and overwhelming stress, they are less likely than their peers to achieve independence.

New research suggests a glimmer of hope exists for this group of youth, and it lies within self-regulation. Self-regulation helps organize thoughts, emotions, tasks, and behaviors to set and achieve goals. This dynamic set of complex cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes lays a foundation for lifelong functioning, and functioning well, in society.

For youth surrounded by environments of chronic stress, extreme poverty, and trauma, the development of healthy self-regulation skills is disrupted, and maladaptive regulation skills can prevail instead. The brain becomes primed to overreact to normal stressors and cognitive energy is quickly depleted, making it difficult to persist at task-oriented action. Self-regulation, including impulse control and distress tolerance are core tenets of social interaction, and the importance of self-regulation on the ability to build strong social networks cannot be overstated.

While the development of self-regulation skills and abilities is complex and occurs over time, it is responsive to intervention and malleable, especially during adolescence and young adulthood.[vii] Current research shows that adolescence and young adulthood present a developmental opportunity to impact neurological flexibility and self-regulation, especially when the opportunities during early childhood have been missed. A focus on relationships and the development of self-regulation skills, within the context of a responsive relationship, changes the brain.[viii]

A Window of Opportunity

Compared to adults, youth experiencing homelessness are at a tipping point where safe shelter and access to services when they need it can be the difference between sliding into a life of chronic homelessness or becoming a productive member of the community. Research has found that 50% of the chronically homeless population first became homeless at some point under the age of 25.[ix] Solving the issue of youth homelessness will greatly reduce the number of adults experiencing chronic homelessness later in life.

For youth experiencing homelessness, concrete abilities alone, such as developing a resume or interview skills, will not produce sustainable results that ensure their success in the world of work. Youth must have the skills to engage in productive relationships and build networks that encourage career mobility and successful co-habitation to confront California's high cost of living. An intentional, evidence-informed focus on self-regulation skills will assist youth in achieving economic stability and social wellness to ensure their success beyond our programs and services.

Two important elements necessary for self-regulation are connection and buffering.[x] Buffering protects youth from environmental stressors such as housing and food instability or frequent placement disruptions. When youth are buffered from stressors, their brain is free to continue to develop positive self-regulation skills. Co-regulation is an interactional process between a youth and a caregiver (teacher, parent, foster parent, social worker, mentor, etc.) that is warm and responsive. Co-regulation is significant because building trust can be a difficult process for youth who come from environments of disconnection. Previous research has shown that frequent contact with staff and consistent interactions with the same staff increased engagement in services among youth.[xi] When a youth is able to connect with a supportive person in this way, they feel safe and secure and reduce demands on already overloaded cognitive and emotional centers.[xii] Frequent, meaningful interactions between staff and youth drive behavior change and positively influence goal attainment.

Knowing that strong support systems and intimate relationships foster well-being has significant implications for service providers and stakeholders who are concerned with improving outcomes for youth experiencing homeless. Providers must prioritize services that facilitate buffering and connection to ensure a youth's homeless experience is brief, rare, and non-recurring. Policymakers and stakeholders, in turn, must direct strategic investments toward programs, interventions, and services that help youth increase these critical internal assets.

Recommendations

The recommendations below come from years of understanding the unique needs of homeless youth and providing evidence-based services that offer long-term solutions to help youth realize their fullest potential as contributing members of society.

Under Governor Newsom, California should prioritize the following resources, services, and investments to improve services for unaccompanied youth facing housing instability:

- **Council Appointee positions** on the Homeless Coordinating and Financing Council should include Secretaries and Directors so key decision makers can comment on and guide the work. Including representatives from education and workforce development entities will also expand representation of service needs for individuals experiencing homelessness, especially youth.

- **Implement a Systems Approach**, as facilitated under SB 918 (Wiener, 2018), to work toward decreasing the frequency and duration of homelessness among youth, improving data collection, coordinating efforts for youth involved with child welfare or juvenile justice systems, and collaborating with youth homelessness stakeholders. The approach is an efficient way to set measurable goals and track progress toward ending youth homelessness.

- **Incorporate youth voice** by including youth with lived experience in listening sessions to guide and ensure success of initiatives that affect the population.

- **Participate in and support efforts to improve Point in Time Counts** for the most accurate data available on youth experiencing homelessness.

- **Allocate resources toward services for unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness.** Funds should target the following:

  - **Prevention and diversion services**: family support and reunification for families in crisis can reduce family fracturing and runaway behavior that leads to homelessness and family-finding services to identify other supportive adults for youth in crisis in lieu of relying on public assistance for support. Open access to outreach and drop-in services stabilize youth and remove external stressors so they can more effectively work on setting and achieving goals to independence.

  - **Diverse and Service-Rich Housing**: homeless youth are a diverse population, and their housing options should reflect and respond to those differences. When youth can choose between time-limited, non-time-limited, congregate or scattered-site, rental subsidy, or host home, they identify an environment where they can thrive and successfully achieve independence. Services must supplement housing to ensure youth receive proper guidance as they continue to develop and acquire the independent living skills adults already possess. Services, including mental health support, case management, transition planning

and coaching to support educational goals and meaningful, living-wage employment further stabilize youth in the transition to adulthood.

- o **Post-housing follow up**: after-care services such as short-term or emergency rental assistance, scaled case management, access to mental and physical health services, and temporary basic needs support keep the youth from relapsing into homelessness in the event of a crisis.

All programs, services, and housing must be specifically designed to respect and meet the needs of LGBTQ+ individuals, youth of color, and youth facing trauma from trafficking, abuse, or other adverse experiences.

Conclusion

California has gained worldwide recognition for its thriving economy and progressive spirit that encourages opportunities for all. Fully embracing California Values involves supporting the disconnected youth and young adults in our state, so they can regain stability and continue on a path toward self-sufficiency for the rest of their lives.

About the California Coalition for Youth

The California Coalition for Youth (CCY) is a 37-year-old, grassroots, nonprofit organization located in Sacramento that, as a statewide coalition, takes positions on and advocates for public policies, programs and services that empower and improve the lives of California's youth, ages 12-24, with a strong focus on disconnected, runaway, and homeless youth. CCY represents several hundred youth and community agencies throughout California. Our coalition acts as a voice for youth and young adults by advocating for public policies, programs and services that respect, empower, and protect the rights of all youth. Learn more at www.calyouth.org.

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