

Literature Review: Youth Transitional Services

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Definition: Youth Transitional Living Services are a multi-purpose and systemic approach for youth and young adults (13-24 years of age) that help in transitioning to a successful adulthood through coordinated permanency and transition planning.

Target Population: Youth and young adults typically between the ages of 16 and 24 years of age and sometimes as young as 13 years of age with mental health needs. Often this includes youth aging out of the foster care system and other youth and young adults who are homeless or precariously housed. Precariously housed includes individuals in danger of becoming literally homeless because they have no place of their own to live or their current housing situation is tenuous. This group includes youth who are living for short periods of time with friends or relatives (couch surfing) and lack a regular nighttime residence. Youth often appear among the precariously housed population because parents who become homeless may place their children with friends or relatives in order to avoid literal homelessness for them. Other youth and young adults could conceivably include youth living in homeless families and unaccompanied youth (Aratani, 2009). Research suggests there is a strong association between homelessness and foster care (Zlotnick, 2009) with one longitudinal study finding that almost 30% of the young people in their study by age 24 had been homeless at least one night since leaving foster care (Dworsky, 2010). There is no common definition of what it means to be a youth and homeless (Edidin, et al., 2012).

The Bernalillo County Behavioral Health Business Plan (BH plan) (CPI, 2015) describes the target population as female adolescents ages 14 to 21 and recommends a 10-bed transitional program. The draft Albuquerque Bernalillo County Government Center (ABCGC) Subcommittee on Housing and Subcommittee on Community Supports proposal entitled "Youth Transitional Housing" mentions housing for homeless or precariously housed youth ages 14 to 24.

Description: This description and the following research summary does not focus on female adolescents or housing. Youth transitional services are designed to address the needs of youth in transition to adulthood as they age out of youth services. Often times these services take the form of independent living services, housing, vocational training, employment, educational, mental health, substance abuse, financial capability, life skills, identity formation, and service coordination. The BH plan (Community Partners Inc., 2015) describes transitional living services as being for adolescents and young adults struggling with substance use, who also may have a co-occurring mental disorder.

The primary intervention of youth transitional services is independent living programs. Youth aging out of youth services who are also aging out of foster care or are homeless are the target of these services. Much of the literature focuses on foster youth transitioning out of care. According to Naccarato and DeLorenzo (2008) and Rashid (2004) youth transitioning to independent living are extremely vulnerable and in comparison to youth with families they experience multiple risk factors including school failure, unemployment, obtaining medical care, housing, homelessness, violence, teen parenthood, involvement with the criminal justice system, substance abuse, and mental health problems. A local county level independent living needs assessment found, that youth transitioning to adulthood need supportive adults and access to basic housing and supportive services typically provided by birth or adoptive parents to youth throughout their late teens and twenties (Mares, 2010). The author notes the results were largely consistent with previously published studies and noted that while this is true local communities are likely to respond differently because of a variety of factors (i.e. funding and levels of service).

Research Summary: Much of the literature on youth transitioning to adulthood from youth services focuses on youth and young adults who are or have transitioned from the foster care system. A review of services and interventions for runaway and homeless youth concluded that comprehensive interventions that target the varied and interconnected needs of youth may be worthy of more study than studies that focus the intervention to one problem (Selsnick et al., 2009).

Rashid (2004) in her exploratory study of a small sample of former foster care youth found that comprehensive transitional living programs can provide former foster care youth opportunities to find and maintain employment, save money, learn daily living skills, and find employment where they earn enough to live independently. The program reviewed was a supervised practice living site with one staff person on-site at all times with a maximum of 15 residents between the ages 18 to 23 that follows an asset-based model of youth development (Small and Memmo, 2013). Osterling and Hines (2006) in their exploratory study of a mentoring program suggest that older adolescent foster youth may experience numerous benefits from participation in a mentoring program.

According to Packard et al. (2008) the most successful transitional programs are those that address the needs of the youth participants with a variety of connected services. Programs that provide a combination of assistance with housing, living skills, education, employment, and mentoring yield the best results. An important aspect of any transitional program is the availability of mentoring and a support system. This finding is supported by other research that has found mentoring relationships provide better outcomes than non-mentored foster youth in areas including education, physical health, and mental health (Pecora, et al., 2006 and Aherns, et al., 2007). Literature on foster youth aging out of the foster care system suggest it is important for youth to have access to a responsible adult they can trust who encourages and assists them while they transition to adulthood.

Literature on youth transitional services for youth aging out of foster care and young adults suffers from several limitations. Follow up periods are relatively short and longer term follow up is needed. The study by Rashid (2004) included a six-month follow up period. Further, sample sizes are often small. Both Rashid (2004) and Oserling and Hines (2006) report small samples. Only one study included in this summary used a comparison group and random assignment did not occur.

Overall, studies reviewed for this summarized literature review deal with youth aging out of the foster care system and young adults who have aged out of the foster care system. Some literature includes runaways and other homeless youth and young adults. The literature is also clear that youth and young adults described in the target population who might benefit from youth transitional services are extremely vulnerable and suggests youth transitional service programs should address multiple concerns and not be focused to a single problem or issue. Research also indicates housing and mentoring by an adult are important components.

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