

## **Evaluation of Chicago's Plan to End Homelessness: Youth Component**

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## Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	2
Introduction.....	10
Methods.....	11
Part I: What We've Learned about Homeless Youth.....	12
Study Participants.....	12
Reasons for Youth Homelessness.....	14
Youth's Family Networks.....	21
Educational Status.....	23
Employment Activities.....	26
The Intersection of Education and Employment.....	28
Goals and Attitudes.....	28
Life Challenges.....	32
Paths to Current Programs.....	36
Part II. Youth's Experiences in the Homeless Youth System.....	41
Process to Enter Programs.....	41
Youth's Ratings of Current Programs.....	49
Programs Provide a Sense of Community.....	49
Participants' Safety.....	54
Services and Reflections.....	59
Part III. Recommendations.....	76
Housing.....	77
Continuing Education.....	77
Careers vs. Jobs.....	77
Responsive Services and Programs.....	77
Supporting Families.....	78
Pregnancy and Parenting among Homeless Youth.....	78
Outreach to Homeless Youth.....	78
Accessing the Homeless Youth System.....	79
Trauma-informed and Asset-based Programming.....	79
Aftercare.....	79
Healthcare.....	79
Mental Health and Counseling.....	80
Transportation.....	80
Homeless Youth's Safety.....	80
Financial Support.....	80
Part IV. Conclusion.....	81
Agencies as Agents of Transformation.....	81
System-level and Societal-level Constraints.....	82
Destigmatizing Homeless Youth.....	82
Limitations and Future Research.....	83
Appendix A: Participants' Paths to Their Current Homeless Youth Programs.....	84
Appendix B: Methodology to Measure Youth's Ratings of Current Programs.....	86
Appendix C: Program Services Identified by Youth Participants.....	87

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2003, in order to address the homelessness problem, representatives from government, service providers, advocacy agencies, universities, and foundations joined together to release a comprehensive plan on homeless policy in Chicago. This plan was published as *Getting Housed, Staying Housed: A Collaborative Plan to End Homelessness* (Chicago Continuum of Care, 2003).

In 2009, as part of an effort to better determine how well clients are doing under this Plan to End Homelessness (PTEH), policy makers and funders provided support to Loyola University and University of Chicago researchers to conduct an evaluation of the service system in Chicago. The evaluation is designed to help guide policy and management of Chicago's system. On the basis of this information, public officials can think through whether the Plan or the operation of certain kinds of programs implemented under the Plan can be improved.

This report summarizes data from in-depth opened ended qualitative interviews with 32 randomly selected youth housed in homeless youth housing programs conducted in 2011. At the time of the interviews there were 152 youth age 18 and older housed in one of the 13 housing programs in the homeless youth system<sup>1</sup>. In addition, we have included data from three focus groups with youth conducted at an earlier stage of the Evaluation of the Plan to End Homelessness in the summer of 2009.

In this report, we first look at what we learned about these homeless youth. We then plot their varied and complex paths to their current programs and discuss how they accessed and entered homeless youth programs. We then describe the youth's experiences in their current programs, focusing on their assessments of the services they receive, their interactions within the programs and how their needs are met. We conclude that these youth are constrained by poverty and disorganized family lives yet are struggling to transition to an independent and functional adulthood with the supportive assistance of the youth programs. We find that these programs provide the youth with stability and support after experiencing a time of dire insecurity. We also find that the youth programs provide services that are responsive to the transformative stage of these youth's lives but are constrained by the limited resources of the homeless system and the limited opportunities that society affords these youth, namely lack of employment, affordable housing, and accessible education.

## WHAT WE'VE LEARNED ABOUT HOMELESS YOUTH

### Study Participants

An important contextual point to keep in mind is that our study focused on youth who were housed in the homeless youth system. Our study did not include youth who were living on the streets or were doubled up with family members and friends at the time of the study.

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<sup>1</sup> In this study we define homeless youth as age 18 to 24. There are youth younger than 18 housed in many of these programs. However, most if not all are being temporarily housed in these programs by a provider from the Comprehensive Community-based Youth Services (CCYS) system and have a goal of reunification with parents or guardians. Since our study's goal was to evaluate the homeless youth system, we did not include these younger youth who technically are part of the CCYS system.

Youth participants ranged in age from 18 to 22 with an average age of 20. A slight majority of the participants (19 participants or 59.4%) identified as women, while 12 participants (37.5%) identified as men and one participant (3.1%) identified as transgender. With regard to race and ethnicity, the majority of participants identified as Black (21 participants or 65.6%). Two participants (6.3%) identified as Hispanic, with one identifying as Mexican and one identifying as Honduran. Two participants (6.3%) identified as “Other,” with one identifying as African and one identifying as Middle Eastern. Seven participants (21.9%) identified as multi-racial.

Just under one-third of the participants in our study were parents at the time of the interview (10 participants or 31.3%). Of the 10 parents, eight had a child or children living with them at the time of the interview. Three of the 10 parents were pregnant at the time of the interview. One additional participant was pregnant and did not already have any children. In total, 21.1% of the young women in our study were pregnant at the time of the interview.

At the time of the interviews, half of the youth had been staying at their current programs for between one and seven months. Only three participants (9.4%) had been at their current programs for less than one month. Thus, most participants had been at their programs for a long enough period of time to be familiar with the programs’ services and staff. The longest a participant had been at the current program was two years and nine months, which was an outlier. The next longest stay was approximately one year and five months. Only six participants (18.8%) had been at their current programs for longer than one year at the time of the interview.

The period of time that participants had been homeless before moving into their current programs ranged greatly from approximately two months to four years. Youth followed a variety of “paths” to their current programs, with a number of “stops” along the way.

### **Reasons for Youth Homelessness**

Participants in our study noted various reasons for their homelessness. Our findings show that youth homelessness, at least among youth in our study, was more of a “situation-driven” rather than a “behavior-driven” process. A number of overlapping reasons for youth’s homelessness emerged.

What became clear from the youth’s stories is that the reasons for their homelessness often were about instability, conflict, and poverty in their families of origin, which resulted in the youth either being kicked out of their homes or deciding to leave on their own accord. Youth described living in very crowded households and having little space physically or emotionally. To a lesser extent, youth mentioned physical violence and substance abuse in their families as contributing factors to their homelessness. In total, they described very unforgiving environments.

Discussions of youth’s behavior were identified as a cause of homelessness by only a minority of the participants. Oftentimes, this behavior grew out of underlying problems, such as poverty and overcrowding. That is, youth may turn to substances and spend extended periods of time away from home as ways to cope with the stress and tension in their households. Additionally, behaviors such as sexual activity and experimenting with drugs are common among adolescents, but youth in more privileged and stable households typically have more resources and support to deal with unintended negative consequences. Thus, for the youth in our study, youth

homelessness was not a result of young people's behaviors that families were unable to live with or control. Rather, youth homelessness largely was a story about the poverty, instability, and conflict that pervaded young people's families.

A noteworthy finding in our study is that few participants described what commonly are considered to be "typical" causes of youth homelessness, such as sexual orientation, gender identity, and aging out of the child welfare system.

### **Youth's Family Networks**

Just as participants described various causes of their homelessness, they discussed having various types of relationships with their family members. The nature of these relationships ranged from *works-in-progress* to *strained* to *close* to *non-existent*. Additionally, participants' reflections on their family networks were complex, as some youth described positive relationships with certain family members and difficult relationships with others.

### **Educational Status**

At the time of the youth interviews, just over half of the participants (53.1%) were in school. They were enrolled at a range of educational institutions including high schools, GED programs, community colleges, and a four-year college. In talking about their educational experiences, a number of youth, especially those in GED programs and community college, communicated their plans to go on to a four-year college. Those youth not in school all indicated that school was in their futures. A number were taking time off from school due to financial constraints. Others were in the process of applying to schools or voiced educational plans for their future plans.

### **Employment Activities**

At the time of the interviews just over 40% of the youth were either employed or in a job training program. All of the employed youth were in low-wage jobs that offered minimal room for professional growth: security, fast food, customer service, and food service. Equally noteworthy is the fact that 66.7% of the employed youth were looking for either a second job or a higher paying job. Almost all of the employed participants found work after entering a homeless youth program. Only one participant, who for three years had been an employee in the food service department at a hospital, was employed before becoming a resident of a youth program.

The unemployed youth were either looking for work, not able to work at the time (i.e. no work permit, pregnant, disability status), focusing on education, or about to enter the Army.

### **The Intersection of Education and Employment**

When education and employment are considered together, all but four of the participants were either in school, employed, or in a job training program. Four participants were engaged in some combination of these activities.

### **Goals and Attitudes**

Participants were goal-oriented and focused on developing their future plans which were, for the majority of youth in our study, graduating from school, securing or maintaining employment and finding stable housing. In youth discussing their goals, certain attitudinal themes emerged. These categories overlap, as participants expressed multiple attitudes. Categorization is subjective in

terms of what we interpreted as independent, motivated, positive, hopeful, confident, reflective, and dedicated attitudes.

### **Attitudes toward Life Challenges**

While youth identified many life challenges and difficulties ranging from health challenges to interpersonal relationships to pregnancy and parenting to educational and employment barriers to homelessness, the vast majority discussed them in the context of addressing and overcoming the challenges. In this way, youth communicated a forward-thinking and goal-oriented outlook. Very few participants presented as feeling defeated or overwhelmed by the challenges they faced. It was much more common for youth to express optimism in the face of these challenges and a belief in their ability to overcome them. In fact, when asked about life challenges, many of the youth indicated that the challenges they faced were minimal. The story that emerged from the interviews was one of hope and resilience. The young people, while describing significant life challenges, presented themselves as active agents of change in their lives

### **Paths to Current Programs**

Given the instability of youth's family lives and the complicated process to enter youth housing programs, it is not surprising that only two youth moved directly from their homes of origin to their current programs. It was much more common for young people to go through several housing options, moving from one living situation to another, before entering their current programs.

It also is not surprising that youth's homes of origin were not necessarily their parents' homes. Some participants described living with older siblings, relatives, or adopted families and becoming homeless when they no longer could stay at these places. Although something prompted them to leave or be removed from their parents' home, that event was not always the beginning of their homelessness or the starting point on their "paths" to their current programs. Participants moved into their current programs with a number of preceding stops at relatives' or friends' homes, shelters, other youth programs, or, in a few cases, the streets. These stops ranged from a few (one to three) to more than six. Their routes into the programs were often circuitous.

## **YOUTH'S EXPERIENCES IN THE HOMELESS YOUTH SYSTEM**

In this section, we describe the processes participants followed to find and access youth housing programs. We also focus on participants' experiences once they entered their current programs, specifically their relationships with staff members and other residents; their safety inside and outside of the programs; and their assessments of the programs' services.

### **Process to Enter Programs**

The youth in our study revealed that gaining entry to their current programs was a complicated, at times confusing process that required initiative and perseverance. Young people discussed having to research programs to learn what was available and what seemed to best meet their needs. Very few used city services to find housing, relying mainly on personal networks and referrals from other agencies. After connecting with a program, they had to navigate the intake process and then, in many cases, diligently maintain contact with the program and find other immediate housing while remaining on a waiting list.

### **Youth Find Services in Youth System More Useful and Helpful Than in Adult System**

Although the interviews with youth were semi-structured qualitative interviews, we included some close-ended quantitative questions at the end of each interview, including questions related to three scales on caring and service quality; service helpfulness; and service usefulness. We then compared the responses of interviewed youth to the responses of individuals between the ages of 18 and 24 who completed Wave 1 surveys, while staying in adult emergency, interim, or permanent supportive housing programs, as part of the overall Evaluation of Chicago's Plan to End Homelessness<sup>2</sup>.

In comparing the experiences of youth in the youth system and youth in the adult system, youth in the youth system rated services and program staff in a more positive light in all three scales. Specifically:

- **Caring and Service Quality:** Youth receiving services in the youth system gave the programs and program staff a higher rating than youth-aged individuals in the adult system (Adult System Mean = 34.88, Youth System Mean = 40.50<sup>3</sup>).
- **Service Helpfulness:** Youth receiving services in the youth system described their programs to be more helpful than the youth-aged individuals in the adult system (Adult Mean = 15.88, Youth Mean = 17.59<sup>4</sup>).
- **Usefulness:** Youth receiving services in the youth system reported that their programs more often found them openings and services in other programs than did youth-aged individuals in the adult system (Adult Mean = 11.31, Youth Mean = 13.65<sup>5</sup>).

Youth's relatively positive assessment of services and staff interactions in the youth programs is supported by our qualitative findings. In both focus groups and interviews, we found negative comments about emergency shelters, which primarily serve adults. Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative results suggest that youth programs are responding successfully to homeless youth's circumstances and needs and are correctly viewing them as adolescents in need of developmentally-appropriate supports rather than as "mini" homeless adults.

### **Programs Provide a Sense of Community**

While discussing their experiences in their current youth housing programs, a theme that emerged was the sense of community that participants felt with staff members and with other residents. Participants strongly valued this sense of community and talked about how their programs provided a sense of family. Overall, these programs are providing youth with a sense of belonging, emotional support, encouragement, guidance and stable material assistance, which are critical especially given the developmental stage of life these young people are in. This is not to say that the participants did not raise issues of conflict, distrust, and insecurity, but they were framed within a secure sense of community/family.

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<sup>2</sup> There were 41 people between the ages of 18 and 24 who completed an adult client survey during Wave 1.

<sup>3</sup> The difference between the means was statistically significant at \*  $p \leq .05$ .

<sup>4</sup> The difference between the means was statistically significant at \*  $p \leq .05$ .

<sup>5</sup> The difference between the means was statistically significant at \*  $p \leq .05$ .

## **Participants' Safety**

The vast majority of respondents stated that they felt safe in their programs, and focus group participants echoed this perspective. Two youth expressed feeling generally safe but with some reservations. Importantly, no youth expressed feeling unsafe in their programs. Interview and focus group participants noted features that made them feel safe, including: locked doors or gates at their programs; having to be “buzzed in” to enter program buildings; alarm systems; a security guard; having their own rooms; and programs’ screening of applicants. However, half of the youth reported feeling unsafe in program neighborhoods and identified a variety of reasons why they felt unsafe. These included shootings and gang activity; drug dealing and groups hanging on street corners; and/or a general unsafe feeling based on a sense that they were living in a “bad neighborhood.”

## **Services**

Overall, participants were appreciative of program services and, for the most part, spoke about them in a matter-of-fact way. That is, youth listed off the variety of services they received and frequently said they felt as if programs were doing enough with regard to each service. The youth described a breadth of services at the homeless youth programs. These services generally aligned with youth’s primary goals, particularly those related to achieving independence, education, employment, and housing. Of particular note was the importance and emphasis the youth placed on the provision of life skills and case management. In addition, they valued the aftercare programs that many of the programs offered. Overall, youth shared very positive assessments of their case managers, valuing the concrete assistance case managers provided, the relational aspects of case management, and case managers’ emotional support.

Youth also identified areas for improvement, especially in the areas of employment services and housing assistance. A common theme was the need to be connected to actual jobs that paid well. Also, while acknowledging the larger constraints of the housing market such as a lack of affordable housing in Chicago, participants indicated that housing services were insufficient. In short, participants expressed a need for concrete housing assistance and connections to available, affordable housing options.

## **CONCLUSION**

A prevailing theme in most of the youth’s discussions of the reasons and paths to homelessness was having grown up in poverty and having experienced chaotic, disorganized family lives. While a small number of youth reflected on how parental response to their behaviors, such as drug use or gang involvement, contributed to their homelessness, these instances were extremely rare.

The life stage of these young people is of particular significance. The youth are in a transitional life stage, and thus the issues they face and the services they need differ a great deal from those of homeless adults. Like all adolescents, they need support in transitioning to adulthood, which requires developing key life and social skills.

The approach and design of the programs in the homeless youth system seem to be shaped by an understanding of these youth’s needs for support and stability. We found that the homeless youth



programs are informed by a developmental approach and are providing youth with much more than simply a place to stay. Beyond housing, programs are providing developmental and practical skills for youth to develop the necessary personal capital to survive on their own. The design of the programs clearly is addressing this developmental need.

Yet, we found that it is expected that programs assist homeless youth in their transition to adulthood in a very short time span of two years or less. While current scholarship on youth focuses on the lengthening of adolescence and delayed adulthood, as many college graduates return to their parents' homes, these homeless youth face a very different set of expectations. In contrast to more-privileged youth, the youth in our study are expected to become independent, self-sufficient adults in their late teens and early 20s. The programs reflect that shorter expectation, and these youth in poverty are not afforded the longer transition to adulthood that is becoming increasingly common in our society. These strict and unequal expectations place undue strain on homeless youth as well as homeless youth providers.

Our research also highlights that homeless youth programs are constrained by the limited resources of the homeless system and larger social problems, such as the prohibitive cost of higher education, lack of employment opportunities, and lack for affordable housing. In short, homeless youth programs face the monumental challenge of helping participants overcome poverty. While the participants in this study were rather positive in their assessment of how programs were preparing them to live on their own and expressed confidence in their ability to meet their goals, particularly regarding housing, education, and employment, the social reality is such that youth likely will struggle to meet these goals, despite personal transformation and individual initiative.

The youth's experiences with, and assessment of, the homeless youth system suggest to us a number of programmatic modifications or expansions. These range from specific programmatic initiatives that address needs of specific sub-groups, such as teen parents, to issues related to safety to expansion of both outreach and aftercare programming. All of these recommendations are detailed in the full report.

There is a policy approach—that was identified to us in discussions with advocates and providers as we reviewed our preliminary findings—that we especially want to highlight: a shift in how funders and providers conceive of providing services to homeless youth by adopting a “Transition Age Youth” framework<sup>6</sup>. This framework recognizes: (1) that all youth need support as they transition to adulthood and thereby de-stigmatizes homeless youth, (2) that different youth need different types of support and thus a “one-size-fits-all” approach to homeless youth services is inadequate, and (3) that homeless youth are unique from homeless adults and constitute a niche group within the larger homeless population that requires specialized services.

### **Limitations and Further Exploration**

This study, one component of an evaluation of Chicago's Plan to End Homelessness, interviewed individuals who were randomly selected from the youth served by homeless youth programs that provide shelter and/or housing. Therefore, the experiences of youth who are currently doubled up,

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<sup>6</sup> The California Institute of Mental Health, for example, uses a “Transition-Age Youth” framework in its approach. See: <http://www.cimh.org/Services/Transition-Age-Youth.aspx>.

squatting, or on the street are not represented. One of our striking findings was that very few of the study's participants discussed issues related to gender identity or sexuality. We do not know if this was because of the reticence of the youth in discussing these issues with the interviewers or because of a lack of youth with these issues in the programs. Other research on youth homelessness shows that these issues are common causes of homelessness. This raises additional important questions: How well is Chicago's homeless youth system meeting the needs of LGBTQ homeless youth, and how can the system be even more responsive?

Additionally, our study did not include youth who were unable to find spaces in our study's programs, for instance because there were no open slots at the time they sought shelter, or who were unable to navigate the at times complicated process of entering programs. As a result, the participants in our study reflect the experiences and perspectives of youth who have the ability to advocate for themselves, which suggests that some homeless youth likely do not possess the skills that are needed to gain entry to some of Chicago's homeless youth programs. The participants in our study may represent the most-skilled, highest-functioning homeless youth, meaning those who were able to navigate access and the intake process as well as follow program rules once housed. This limitation raises important questions for future research to investigate, such as how many homeless youth are either not seeking out these programs' services or are unable to finish these programs and why. In other words, how many homeless youth are not being served and why? An additional future research question is what is happening to homeless youth who are not accessing these programs' services.

## INTRODUCTION

In Chicago, nearly 6,000 single individuals and members of families are homeless each night<sup>7</sup>. In the year 2003, in order to address the homelessness problem, representatives from government, service providers, advocacy agencies, universities, and foundations joined together to release a comprehensive plan on homeless policy in Chicago. This plan was published as *Getting Housed, Staying House: A Collaborative Plan to End Homelessness* (Chicago Continuum of Care, 2003).

The Plan outlined a bold, ambitious strategy for ending homelessness in Chicago within ten years (i.e. The Ten Year Plan or the Plan). It argues for doing away with the traditional approach for treating homelessness. Under that approach, individuals and families who were homeless were provided beds in shelters and then were expected to find services they needed to help them solve the problems (such as mental health or employment problems) that might make it difficult for them to find a permanent dwelling. Clients only were provided permanent housing when deemed ready, and they often had to search for the housing on their own.

New policy undertaken by the Plan is based on what is called a Housing First approach. As recommended by several contemporary scientific studies, Housing First calls for providing affordable housing to clients as soon as possible and then working with the clients to confront other life challenges. If not yet in permanent housing, clients are expected to be referred to such housing as soon as possible. While services are provided, housing (in theory) does not depend on the use of services.

In 2009, as part of an effort to better determine how well clients are doing under the Plan to End Homelessness (PTEH), policymakers and funders provided support to Loyola University Chicago and University of Chicago researchers to conduct an evaluation of the service system in Chicago. The evaluation is designed to help guide policy and management of Chicago's system. On the basis of this information, public officials can think through whether the plan or the operation of certain kinds of programs can be improved.

As funded, the research addresses several specific goals:

- To detail the program models that actually have been implemented;
- To determine if there are gaps or other service delivery issues in the implemented programs;
- To trace client outcomes under service programs provided under the Plan;
- To determine if resources and programs are appropriately targeted to improve those outcomes; and
- To detail client needs.

The research is specifically linked to targeted recommendations for efficiently and effectively improving Chicago's homeless system. Currently it is informing policymakers in the development of the next version of Chicago's Plan to End Homeless ("version 2.0").

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<sup>7</sup> 5,922 individuals and family member were identified as homeless in the 2007 "Point in Time" survey in Chicago.

To accomplish these goals, the evaluation has several components, including focus groups with consumers, participant observation of homeless individuals at points of entry into the homeless service system (i.e. police stations and hospital emergency rooms), an assessment of the city of Chicago's 311 City Services line, a survey of program administrators, and a longitudinal survey of clients originally housed in the system.

The current report presents analysis of data from qualitative interviews with youth in the service system. The guiding research questions for this component are:

- Who are the homeless youth being served by the service system?
- What circumstances led homeless youth to seek services from the homeless youth system?
- How do homeless youth access the homeless youth system?
- How do homeless youth move through the homeless youth system?
- What are homeless youth's experiences in the homeless youth system?
- What types of services do homeless youth receive?
- How are the homeless youth's needs met?

In this report, we first look at what we learned about these homeless youth. We then plot their varied and complex paths to their current programs and discuss how they accessed and entered homeless youth programs. We then describe the youth's experiences in their current programs, focusing on their assessments of the services they receive, their interactions within the programs and how their needs are met. We conclude that these youth are constrained by poverty and disorganized family lives yet are struggling to transition to an independent and functional adulthood with the supportive assistance of the youth programs. We find that these programs provide the youth with stability and support after experiencing a time of dire insecurity. We also find that the youth programs provide services that are responsive to the transformative stage of these youth's lives but are constrained by the limited resources of the homeless system and the limited opportunities that society affords these youth, namely lack of employment, affordable housing, and accessible education.

## METHODS

At the time we began the youth component of the overall Evaluation of Chicago's Plan to End Homelessness, there were 152 youth age 18 or older in the homeless youth system<sup>8</sup>, and there were a total of 13 homeless youth programs in this system. One homeless youth program was excluded from our study because it only served youth under age 18. Two more programs were excluded because they did not respond to our attempts to include them in the study. In total, we interviewed 32 youth at 10 different homeless youth programs.

Trained interviewers conducted one-on-one, in-person qualitative interviews with each study participant. All interviews were audio-recorded. Interviewers followed a structured interview

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<sup>8</sup> In this study we define homeless youth as age 18 to 24. There are youth younger than 18 housed in many of these programs. However, most if not all are being temporarily housed in these programs by a provider from the Comprehensive Community-based Youth Services (CCYS) system and have a goal of reunification with parents or guardians. Since our study's goal was to evaluate the homeless youth system, we did not include these younger youth who technically are part of the CCYS system.

guide that consisted of open-ended questions. The interviews covered a number of topics, including: experiences in the current program, case management, services received from current program, participants' reflections on these services, preparations for when leaving current program, goals, life challenges and difficulties, process of coming into the homeless system, cause of homelessness, and family history.

Each interview also included a short quantitative section at the end, in which participants were asked to respond to a series of quantitative questions to rate their current programs and a series of demographic questions.

All interviews were transcribed, and qualitative data analysis was used to assess interview data. Analysis concentrated on examining themes related to the topic areas noted above, as well as identifying emergent themes. For the qualitative data analysis, we used the qualitative software package NVivo, which is commonly used for this type of interview data. Throughout data analysis, we met frequently to discuss, review, and refine themes.

While this report focuses on individual interviews with youth participants in the homeless system, we also drew on our findings from focus groups with youth participants in the homeless system that were completed during June and July 2009. We completed three focus groups with a total of 20 youth at three separate programs. Seven youth participated in the focus group at an interim program on the north side. Eight youth participated in a focus group at a permanent housing program on the south side. Five participants participated in a focus group at a permanent housing program on the west side. We report primarily on the interview findings, but where we find resonance, we note both interviews and focus groups.

## **PART I. WHAT WE'VE LEARNED ABOUT HOMELESS YOUTH**

### **Study Participants**

An important contextual point to keep in mind is that our study focused on youth who were housed in the homeless youth system. Our study did not include youth who were living on the streets or were doubled up with family members and friends at the time of the study.

Our research provides a great deal of information about homeless youth who were residing at and receiving services from residential homeless youth programs that were operating in Chicago at the time of our study. Table 1 (on the next page) provides a breakdown of key descriptive characteristics of the interviewed youth.

#### Age and Gender

As Table 1 shows, youth participants ranged in age from 18 to 22 with an average age of 20. A slight majority of the participants (19 participants or 59.4%) identified as women, while 12 participants (37.5%) identified as men and one participant (3.1%) identified as transgender.

#### Race/Ethnicity

With regard to race and ethnicity, the majority of participants identified as Black (21 participants or 65.6%). Two participants (6.3%) identified as Hispanic, with one identifying as Mexican and one identifying as Honduran. Two participants (6.3%) identified as "Other," with one identifying

as African and one identifying as Middle Eastern. Seven participants (21.9%) identified as multi-racial. Of these, two identified as Black and American Indian; one identified as Black and White; one identified as Black and Puerto Rican; one identified as Black and Creole – French/African; one identified as Black, White, and American Indian; and one identified as Black, Asian, White, and American Indian.

**Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Interviewed Youth**

<b>Descriptive</b>	<b>Youth (n=32)</b>
Mean Age (years)	19.75
Median Age (years)	20
Age Range (years)	18 – 22
Male	12 (37.5%)
Female	19 (59.4%)
Transgender	1 (3.1%)
Black	21 (65.6%)
Hispanic	2 (6.3%)
Other	2 (6.3%)
Multi-racial	7 (21.9%)
Parent <sup>1</sup>	10 (31.3%)
Pregnant	4 (12.5%)
Criminal Record <sup>2</sup>	2 (6.3%)
Mental Health Needs	4 (12.5%)
Substance Abuse Needs	2 (6.3%)
Length of Time in Program	2 weeks to 2 years, 9 months
Less than 1 month	3 (9.4%)
1 – 3 months	13 (40.6%)
4 – 7 months	3 (9.4%)
8 months – 1 year	7 (21.9%)
Over 1 year	6 (18.8%)
Length of homelessness	Approximately 2 months to 4 years

<sup>1</sup> One additional participant was pregnant at the time of the interview.

<sup>2</sup> One additional participant had his criminal record expunged.

### Parental Status

Just under one-third of the participants in our study were parents at the time of the interview (10 participants or 31.3%). Of the 10 parents, eight had a child or children living with them at the time of the interview. Three of the 10 parents were pregnant at the time of the interview. One additional participant was pregnant and did not already have any children. In total, 21.1% of the young women in our study were pregnant at the time of the interview.

### Criminal Record

With regard to criminal records, only two participants (6.3%) indicated having one. An additional participant shared that his criminal record had been expunged at some point in the past.

### Mental Health

Regarding mental health needs, it is important to note that these numbers reflect youth's self-reporting about their own issues. Only four participants (12.5%) explicitly identified having a

mental health need. Of these four youth, one participant identified having bi-polar disorder; one participant explained having “mental problems” and identified trouble sleeping and bad dreams as particular issues; one participant identified as having “social phobia,” and one participant generally shared having “some mental problems.” This number may be an underestimate, as mental health issues generally are stigmatized and thus participants may have been reluctant to disclose this concern.

### Substance Abuse

Similarly, it is important to note that the numbers regarding substance abuse needs reflect only youth’s self-reported needs. Only two participants (6.3%) disclosed having substance abuse needs. One participant reported having a problem with marijuana but said that he had stopped smoking the substance on his own. Another participant reported that she continued to smoke marijuana and thought her program could improve the substance abuse education it offered.

### Duration in Program

At the time of the interviews, half of the youth had been staying at their current programs for between one and seven months. Only three participants (9.4%) had been at their current programs for less than one month. Thus, most participants had been at their programs for a long enough period of time to be familiar with the programs’ services and staff. The longest a participant had been at the current program was two years and nine months, which was an outlier. The next longest stay was approximately one year and five months. Only six participants (18.8%) had been at their current programs for longer than one year at the time of the interview.

### Time Homeless

The period of time that participants had been homeless before moving into their current programs ranged greatly from approximately two months to four years. As we discuss below (see the Paths to Current Programs section, p. 36-41), youth followed a variety of “paths” to their current programs, with a number of “stops” along the way.

## **Reasons for Youth Homelessness**

Participants in our study noted various reasons for their homelessness. Our findings show that youth homelessness, at least among youth in our study, was more of a “situation-driven” rather than a “behavior-driven” process. As Table 2 (on the next page) shows, a number of overlapping reasons for youth’s homelessness emerged.

What became clear from the youth’s stories is that the reasons for their homelessness often were about instability, conflict, and poverty in their families of origin, which resulted in the youth either being kicked out of their homes or deciding to leave on their own accord. Youth described living in very crowded households and having little space physically or emotionally. In total, they described very unforgiving environments.

### Chaotic, Disorganized, Turbulent Family Life

The vast majority of youth (24 youth or 75%) described chaotic, disorganized, turbulent family life situations as immediate reasons for their homelessness. Within this context of instability, participants shared a number of specific issues that exacerbated already precarious housing situations.

**Table 2 Reasons for Homelessness**

<b>Reason for Homelessness</b>	<b>Youth<sup>1</sup></b>
Chaotic, disorganized, turbulent family life	24 (75%)
Family's capacity to support youth	7 (21.9%)
No family	2 (6.3%)
Time to become independent	2 (6.3%)

<sup>1</sup> Note: Youth's stories are counted in more than one category.

Conflict with family/head of household

Twenty youth (62.5%) discussed some type of conflict with family members or the head of household as a contributing factor to their homelessness. For instance, participants described not being able to get along with their parents and/or their parents' boyfriends or girlfriends. One young person explained she and her mother had moved in with her mother's boyfriend. Her mother eventually kicked her out because her mother's boyfriend did not want the participant to live with them any longer. According to this participant, after a disagreement with her mother's boyfriend, he "made it seem like I went crazy or something, but I didn't. She [her mother] wasn't there, so she believed him instead of me." As a result, her mother kicked her out about two weeks before the participant's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Similarly, another participant's mother kicked him out after they had an altercation, because she felt he was old enough, at age 19, to support himself.

Youth's behavior. Of these 20 youth who discussed family conflicts as a cause of homelessness, only eight participants (25%) described how their own behavior contributed to the conflict.

Three youth (9.4%) shared that they were kicked out of their homes because they were pregnant or because they had a child. One young woman, who described experiencing several homeless episodes, shared that her mother first kicked her out at age 15 because she became pregnant. She explained:

*At my age, at 15, that's when I was kicked out of home, basically because I became a teenage pregnancy, I was pregnant, like a teenager. And my mom particularly didn't like my husband, which was my boyfriend a long time ago. And she didn't like him, so she's like, 'Get out my home! I disown you!' And that actually hurt me, you know.*

Another young woman's mother "put her out" for a number of reasons, such as she had a one-year-old daughter and had left school despite being only 18. A third young woman described not being able to get along with her mother, in part because she became pregnant at age 16, which put her on bad terms with her mother.



Two youth (6.3%) explained that they were kicked out of their homes at least in part because of drugs. For instance, one young person shared that he always had a “rocky” relationship with his mother and never saw eye-to-eye. His mother told him he had to move out, though, after she saw a video on YouTube of the participant smoking pot with his nephew. Another participant, who first became homeless after a conflict with his stepfather, described how dealing drugs contributed to a later spell of homelessness. After he had moved back in with his mother, they continued to fight, in part because she did not approve of him selling drugs. He eventually moved out because of this conflict with his mother.

Three youth (9.4%) were homeless due to more general behavioral reasons. One young person became homeless some time after his release from a juvenile detention center, where he stayed from age 12 to 17. Another young person said that her mother cited different reasons for kicking her out, including being “delinquent,” because she was gay, and because she was 18. A third participant described how her mother kicked her out after she got into a fight with her sister. She had been living with her mother again for only three weeks. Prior to this stay with her mother, she lived with her child’s father and his mother and had lived at Job Corps, which she described as a program for “bad kids.”

It is important to note that these behaviors the participants described often grew out of underlying problems, such as poverty and overcrowding. That is, youth may turn to substances and spend extended periods of time away from home as ways to cope with the stress and tension in their households. Additionally, behaviors such as sexual activity and experimenting with drugs are common among adolescents, but youth in more privileged and stable households typically have more resources and support to deal with unintended negative consequences. Thus, for the youth in our study, youth homelessness was not a result of young people’s behaviors that families were unable to live with or control. Rather, youth homelessness largely was a story about the poverty, instability, and conflict that pervaded young people’s families.

### Family violence

Beyond the general chaos, disorganization, and turbulence that characterized many young people’s families of origin, five participants (15.6%) specifically discussed physical violence in their families and identified this violence as a contributing factor to their homelessness. For instance, one participant shared that while he had been homeless several times for different reasons, he first became homeless at age 12 or 13 after a fight with his stepfather in which they “traded blows.” Although he later moved back in, his stepfather held a grudge, and the participant became homeless again at age 15 after fighting with his mother and stepfather.

In an additional case, a young woman had obtained an order of protection against her father and had moved out several times because she no longer felt safe in her parents’ home. She explained:

*My dad’s got a really bad temper. And I can’t do yelling very well. Like if you yell, I shut down completely. I could probably yell pretty loud. But once he starts yelling or once anyone starts yelling at me, I shut down. That’s like my one thing.*

*And he yells. Like he'll start yelling, and I'll shut down, and then he thinks I'm not listening. So, cops have been called a few times for domestic violence. I never charged my dad with anything. But I think like the last time I was there, we were in my garage and something happened and like the neighbor called, and the police ended up pressing charges on my dad. And I guess they can do that. I never knew they could do that or something. I guess they can, like after a certain amount of times, if it's domestic violence and stuff. And I had no idea, and I had moved out, and my dad's like, 'Now I'm going to court for you, blah, blah, blah.' And he'll call and threaten me, and then he wants me to come home, which is so weird. And then she [participant's mother] wants me to come home, but then he, 'Oh you're not going to be safe out there. You're going to be safe if you come home.' But then it's not safe there because all the domestic violence and stuff and all the police getting called. And I don't like that. So I have a protection of order on him, and that's it.*

*Intimate partner violence.* In three of these cases (9.4%), youth discussed intimate partner violence. One case of intimate partner violence occurred between the participant's sister and the sister's boyfriend, with whom the participant was living; a second case occurred between the participants' parents; and the third case occurred between the participant and her child's father, with whom she had moved in.

#### *Family members' substance abuse*

Eight participants (25%) described how family members' substance abuse contributed to their unstable home environments and ultimately to their homelessness. One participant described how he frequently fought with his parents, both of whom had an alcohol problem. He explained:

*I moved out of my mom's house last summer because I didn't like a lot of what was going on with my parents and my life because I didn't think it was going anywhere. It's like I'm being imprisoned in home, and I'm not being treated right at all. So it's like, you know, I'm 18, and if she's not going to let me go to college and, you know, get a job, then I'm going to have to leave because there is no point in me ever sitting around on my butt babysitting kids.*

While this participant was troubled by the general discontent in his home, he ultimately left after having a fight with his parents, during which they were drunk.

Another participant similarly described how her parent's substance abuse contributed to her homelessness. She shared, "I was living [with] my mom at one point in time. Uh, we don't really see eye to eye 'cause she drinks, and I don't like to be around drunks. You know, I mean I couldn't take it no more, I just left." She added that she frequently argued with her mother " 'cause she gets drunk and want to pick at me, and I don't, don't be wanting to deal with all that."

In cases such as these, youth's parents did not necessarily cause their homelessness by kicking them out explicitly. However, the parents' behaviors, specifically their issues with addiction, pushed these young people out of their homes. In at least two other cases, caregivers forced

participants to move out, and participants believed substance abuse contributed to these events. One participant described how he and his mother lived with his grandmother, who kicked him out after an altercation. He elaborated, “She do drugs. Every time I don’t got no money, she gets mad and want to put me out and stuff like that. ’Cause she wants to get money for drugs, and she always asked me, and if I don’t got and I do got it, she gets mad and want to put me out.”

In sum, one-quarter of participants identified family members’ substance abuse as a significant, contributing cause of their homelessness.

### Youth pregnancy

Above, we noted pregnancy as an unacceptable behavior, according to family members’ perspectives, that contributed to three participants (9.4%) being kicked out of their homes. Here, we also highlight youth pregnancy as its own category because it posed such a formidable set of ongoing challenges to the young women in our study who were pregnant and/or parenting at the time of their interviews. We discuss these challenges in greater detail below in the Life Challenges section (see p. 33).

At this point, we note that four young women (12.5% of all interviewed youth and 21.1% of the interviewed women) identified pregnancy as a contributing factor to their homelessness. While three young women were kicked out of their homes, the fourth participant explained that she wanted to move out of her sister’s home, where she had been living for three to four months, once she became pregnant. As she explained, “You know I just don’t want to live in someone’s house and not do, I can’t do anything, I’m pregnant.” While pregnancy was not the sole cause of this participant’s homelessness, it was a significant factor that motivated her to leave her sister’s home and seek residence at and supportive services from her current program.

### Family’s Lack of Capacity to Support Youth

Approximately 22% of the participants (seven young people) discussed how their family members’ limited financial means contributed to their homelessness. In some cases, these participants also experienced family conflicts, such as when they moved from one home to another. All seven of these participants, though, identified their family’s lack of capacity to support them as a contributing reason for their homelessness.

One young man, for instance, described how his brother’s career and his uncle’s illness were precursors to his homelessness. He explained:

*I have an uncle out there who actually raised me and my brother until we got our own apartment. And he’s [his brother] only four years older than me, so it’s not like that, he’s basically like that father role, you know? He basically got me through high school and everything else. He made sure I didn’t get in trouble, and I think I turned out pretty well. And so, he had moved on and he had gotten deployed to Afghanistan, so now I’m out here all alone in Chicago, and it’s new for me, but I’m managing it. I still contact my brother at least once a week.*

He had considered moving back in with his uncle after his brother left, but his uncle was ill and not able to support him. He then moved in with an aunt he hardly knew, and a conflict with her led to him moving into his current program.

A second participant also attributed her homelessness to her family's limited ability to support her. She recalled:

*I was staying with my mom after the school year ended last year, and I was trying to look for work, and I couldn't find any, and my mom said she could no longer afford to have me live with her, like for free. And so I was, I like was at my wits' end as of where to go, where to stay. And so for like a week before coming here I was spending the night at the beach. And then like a week later I decided to call [her current program].*

Similarly, another participant said that her mother "put me out" because she was being evicted. This participant explained that this decision benefitted her mother since her mother "need[ed] somewhere to stay, so she didn't want to have to bring her daughter along, too. If she was staying in a male's house, she didn't want me to be involved."

Yet another participant explained that he had been living in a family shelter with his mother and siblings. When their four-month stay was up at that shelter, the family moved to another family shelter that had a policy not to accept male children age 18 or older. Because he was 18, he had to separate from his family and enter a youth housing program on his own.

For these participants, there was no noteworthy fight or irresolvable conflict that separated them from their parents or family members who had been caregivers. Rather, these participants offered accounts of how family members' limited ability to provide support contributed to their homelessness.

#### Extremely crowded households

Approximately three of the participants (9.4%) who referred to their family's lack of capacity to support them described severe overcrowding in households where they lived at one point. One participant explained that the household in which she lived with her grandparents, mother, uncle, and brother became too overwhelming. According to her:

*Well, the house that I did come from, just too much going on. I just wasn't getting along with nobody. And it was all because, it's just the things that people do. Drinking, down talk, I don't have time for that. Laziness. I call people out on laziness...You got this grown men there, they don't take out the trash, they don't wash the dishes, they don't clean the floor, they don't mop the floor, they don't mow the grass...I got tired of it. I needed my own space away from that...I cannot sit around an environment that is like caving in on me because I want to start [to] get focused, so that's why I am here [at her current program].*

In situations such as this one, young people described limited resources and how a lack of privacy contributed to ongoing conflicts among household members. It is possible that

participants could have continued to live with supportive family members if there were not so many other people living in the household.

### No Family

In two cases (6.3%), young people explained how they were homeless because they had no family members on whom they could rely for assistance. Both of these participants were not aware of any family members living in the United States and had spent time at immigrant detention centers upon arriving to the United States. One young man was a refugee from Somalia, whose immediate family had been killed. The second young man had come to the United States alone. Regarding his arrival, he recalled:

*I didn't have any plans of where to go because I don't have family or friends here. When I crossed to the U.S., I came on the freight trains into the U.S. I had no idea where I would arrive. I had a friend who was in Houston, but I didn't have his phone number. I didn't want to run from immigration, so I stayed there, and they took me into custody. I was in custody for seven days. I thought they were going to deport me, but they didn't deport me. They put me in a plane and brought me to Chicago.*

### Time to Become Independent

In two additional cases (6.3%), participants described how they left home because they felt it was time to become independent. In other words, neither family conflict nor lack of resources pushed them into homelessness. For instance, when asked how she came into the homeless youth system, one young woman replied:

*I chose to leave and be grown and experience life by myself. And to stop basically living under my grandma's rules and house, because I felt like I was 20, I was 20 at the time, and I was about to be 21 and fully grown. Who still lives with their grandmother? You supposed to be out on your own. That's how I look at it. And so I just left so I could go out and show my family that I didn't [need] to leech off of them.*

In this example, the homeless youth program became a bridge for this young woman to establish her independence. The role of agencies in aiding homeless youth in their transitions to adulthood is a central finding that we return to below.

### Little Discussion of Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Aging Out of DCFS

A noteworthy finding from our study is that few participants described what commonly are considered to be “typical” causes of youth homelessness, such as sexual orientation, gender identity, and aging out of the child welfare system. Only one participant shared that her non-heterosexual orientation contributed to her homelessness, and she identified her sexual orientation as one of three reasons her mother gave for kicking her out<sup>9</sup>. Additionally, the one

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<sup>9</sup> It is likely that some participants identified as LGBTQ but chose not to disclose this identity to interviewers. Our questionnaire did not explicitly ask for sexual orientation and relied on participants sharing that information when asked about reasons for becoming homeless.

participant in our study who identified as transgendered did not indicate gender identity as a reason why this participant's grandmother kicked this participant out.

While no participants explicitly talked about becoming homeless as a result of "aging out" of the child welfare system, there were indications that this was in fact the case in some instances. Seven participants (21.9%) explicitly mentioned being adopted (at times by a family member) or being in a foster family and leaving that home for various reasons, such as to attend college or to get away from ongoing conflicts. Three of these participants indicated that their adopted families no longer would support the youth because the financial assistance they once received had run out. Youth did not necessarily perceive leaving their adopted families as the start of their homelessness, as some moved in with other relatives and had to leave those homes due to factors such as conflicts. In some cases, youth thus identified the start of their homelessness as when they left these second homes. Nevertheless, the loss of financial assistance contributed to participants' housing instability and eventual entrance to their current programs. It thus follows that continued financial assistance, either to the adopted families or to the youth directly, might have increased young people's housing options and stability.

### **Youth's Family Networks**

Just as participants described various causes of their homelessness, they discussed having various types of relationships with their family members. The nature of these relationships ranged from *works-in-progress* to *strained* to *close* to *non-existent*. Additionally, participants' reflections on their family networks were complex, as some youth described positive relationships with certain family members and difficult relationships with others.

#### Distant Relationships

At the time of the interviews, a slight majority of the youth interviewed (59.4%) characterized their current relationships with family members as detached and distant. As discussed above, the vast majority of youth (75%) described chaotic, disorganized and turbulent family life situations. Such circumstances impacted the ways in which the young people related to their families, as a number of participants connected their current weak family ties to a history of conflict and neglect within their families. Some youth mentioned family members' continued substance abuse as a main reason why they had minimal contact with them. Other youth explicitly said the mistreatment they experienced in their families of origin, such as family members' emotional unavailability and overall lack of support, was the main reason they presently limited contact with family members. For instance, one young person explained that his family never was there for him and, because of this, he chose to remain emotionally disengaged from them. According to him:

*I've never been a person who's really connected with my family. I've always been, or with anybody, I been a by myself person. The relationship that we did have is not there. So I haven't seen a lot of my family in the years. So, that's just the choices where I've made. It's like, 'You wasn't there when I needed you. You wasn't never really there. You wasn't, I could never really get into contact with you. We really didn't see eye to eye on a lot of things. So there's no point in me sittin' here tryin' to make a 360 and get connected with you all now, which probably ya'll really don't, I personally feel like ya'll really don't give a damn*

*about me anyways.' So I just kept the relationship outs – they still know that I'm there, but I'm distant, like a distant level. Where I'm just someone you see once in a while. We just love each other because we're family, but other than that, we really don't have a relationship like that.*

As this young man indicated, challenges with family relationships persisted for many youth at the time of the interviews.

Despite these challenges, a number of participants described being at peace with their decisions to minimize contact with family and indicated that they did not hold any hard feelings against unsupportive family members. Indicative of this willingness to move on, one young woman, whose mother had put her out, explained, "I think it's more that, I have not held grudges about the past and stuff. My mom has done a lot to me. I haven't really dwelled on it or anything like that." Similarly, a young man who described having only infrequent contact with his mother categorized their relationship as "Not good. They [his mother and stepfather] don't call me as much to talk. So, I just roll with the flow, you know."

### Reestablishing Relationships

Just over one-quarter of participants (nine youth), described being in the process of reestablishing ties with family members with whom they historically had conflict-ridden relationships. Representative of this trend, one young man shared that he was working through issues with his mother, who was abusive to him during his childhood and who he felt was overly critical, negative, and never satisfied with his choices. Despite this history, when asked about his current relationship with his mother, he replied, "Yeah, me and my mom, we're cool." In describing how they have reached a point where they are "cool" with each other, he shared:

*You got to start with family, man. Like, my family aren't drug addicts or drunks or cigarette smokers, well my mom's not. My mom tried her best, you know what I'm saying? It's not like my mom was an addict or I was a crack baby. I'm not going to hold a grudge, you know what I'm saying? It's like, I grew up. That's how, you know, I'm not 14, 15, 13. I grew up. Ok, I couldn't waste my energy holding a grudge against you or being mad against you when, like, I can just move on, figure out something else.*

For many of these participants, relationships with family members, particularly with parents, had been improving since moving away from home and into their current programs. For instance, one young woman, who became homeless when she left her mother's home due to ongoing conflicts with her mother's boyfriend, described feeling that her mother had been more respectful toward her since she moved into her current program. She commented,

*Ever since I've been living with [her current program] and had my apartment, I've grown closer to my mother. So, I mean, it's not like we were ever really not close. We talked. But, it's much better, I would say. Much better. Like she come visits. She's, well, she's always at the hospital with me when I'm in the hospital. But we talk more. So it's pretty good.*

For participants such as these, moving into stable housing provided an opportunity to repair family relationships and move beyond past harms. Moving into a homeless youth program did not signify a break with family. In some cases, the exact opposite result occurred.

### Historically Close Relationships Remain Strong

Nearly half of the participants (14 youth) identified at least one family member with whom they had a historically close relationship. Even if they described conflicts with parents or other caregivers that led to their homelessness, they discussed being able to rely on other family members for support and continuing to do so since moving into their current programs. One young woman described mostly poor relationships with family members, with the exception of her brother:

*The only one that really has a connection is me and my brother...he like the only one that I have like a close relationship with. Like, everybody else in our family, it's not a brother-sister relationship, a mother-daughter relationship, it's like we all just, like, separated in some kind of way. Like, it's just weird.*

Other participants described mostly positive relationships with multiple family members, such as siblings, cousins, nephews, and parents. In some cases, participants described talking with these close family members every day. Again, participants did not leave their family ties behind as part of moving forward in their programs. Rather, they incorporated the homeless youth programs into their lives.

### No Contact with Family

Just two participants described having no contact with any family members at the time of the interviews. One participant was a refugee from Somalia who did not know if he had any living relatives. Another participant had obtained an order of protection against her father and actively worked to prevent having contact with him.

## **Educational Status**

At the time of the youth interviews, 17 participants (53.1%) were in school, and 14 participants (43.8%) were not in school (Table 3, next page).

### Youth in School

Youth were enrolled at a range of educational institutions, including high schools, GED programs, community colleges, and a four-year college. It is noteworthy that a little over three-quarters of the participants in school enrolled after entering a homeless youth program.

### High school

Five of the participants were in high school at the time of the interviews. Four of the five had enrolled in high school after entering a homeless youth program. Of these four participants, one dropped out of high school during her senior year when she became pregnant; one left high school after repeatedly getting into trouble and missing classes; and two did not provide additional background information. Only one participant remained in high school in between becoming homeless and entering a homeless youth program.



### GED programs

Five participants (15.6%) were enrolled in a GED program. Two of these participants were in a GED program before entering a homeless youth program and three participants enrolled in a GED program after entering a homeless youth program. Two participants described the GED as a step in a long process that would culminate in college.

**Table 3 Educational Status of Interviewed Youth**

<b>Educational Status</b>	<b>Youth (n=31)<sup>1</sup></b>
<b>In School</b>	<b>17 (53.1%)</b>
High school	5 (15.6%)
GED program	5 (15.6%)
Community college	6 (18.8%)
Four-year college	1 (3.1%)
Enrolled in school <i>before</i> entering homeless youth program	4 (12.5%, 25% of youth in school)
Enrolled in school <i>after</i> entering homeless youth program	13 (40.6%, 76.5% of youth in school)
<b>Not in School</b>	<b>14 (43.8%)</b>
Applying to institution of higher education	2 (6.3%)
Taking time off	5 (15.6%)
Plan to further education eventually	4 (15.6%)
Waiting to take GED exam	3 (9.4%)

<sup>1</sup> Note: One participant, whose educational status was unclear, is not included in this table.

### College

A noteworthy number of participants, six in total (18.8%), were students at a community college at the time of the study. One youth attended school before entering a homeless youth program, and the remaining five began attending community college after entering a homeless youth program. One youth studied information technology; two youth studied criminal justice; two youth studied early childhood development; and one youth did not disclose his area of concentration. Two youth indicated that they anticipated transferring to a four-year college after completing their Associate's Degree.

Only one participant was enrolled at a four-year college at the time of the study. This youth was a fourth-year student studying music education at a music college and had enrolled in college before entering a homeless youth program.

### Plans to continue on to college

In talking about their educational experiences, a number of youth in GED programs and community college communicated their plans to go on to a four-year college. One participant described this educational path:

*I start to go to school in May, to go to work towards my GED, which I took a practice test, a GED practice test, and I pass all the subjects, so I think I'm almost ready...the next two weeks I'm gonna try to send mail to [the company that administers the GED exam] ...And I want to get a date set for my GED exam. And*

*after that and I want to do my GED, and if I pass, then that's one step towards college.*

Another youth explained, "I applied to Columbia, and I think I'm missing something from my application. And [if] I can actually transfer there, which would be sweet. Because I dreamt about going to that school for awhile."

### Youth Not in School

While just under half of the participants (14 youth, 43.8%) were not in school at the time of the study, they all indicated that school was in their futures.

### Connected to school

The majority of the youth (10) who were not in school indicated that they were concretely connected to some type of educational program. Two youth were in the process of applying to identified programs. Three youth were waiting to take the GED test<sup>10</sup>. Five youth recently had been in school but were taking time off for various reasons.

*Financial constraints.* Most of the participants who were taking time off from school talked about reasons related to financial concerns. Two of these youth were planning to re-enroll based on assistance their current programs had provided. One participant was forced to leave a community college after finding out that his financial aid package would not cover his spring semester. With the assistance of his case manager, this participant was able to reinstate his financial aid, thus allowing him to return to school the following semester. Similarly, a young woman shared that she left a community college mid-semester after she was charged nearly \$500 for a class she dropped. She eventually was able to pay the school back with assistance from her case manager and planned to return the following semester.

Another participant left school mid-semester after running out of money to pay for her classes. She had been enrolled at a state university but explained, "I had to drop out because I didn't have nobody to help me. And then, like, I didn't have financial aid. So the only way I could finish going to [name of the school] was somebody take out a loan for me, but nobody wanted to do that, so I ended up dropping out."

One youth discussed his decision to leave a community college for one semester to work and planned to return to school the following semester.

### Not connected to school

The four youth who were not enrolled in an education program had less defined plans to continue their education. Although they were not explicitly connected to the education system, all expressed schooling goals. One youth discussed her intention to enroll in a CNA program after the birth of her second child. Another youth, who had graduated from high school while a participant in a homeless youth program, expressed a desire to apply to a community college. A

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<sup>10</sup> Two of these youth shared their plans to attend college after passing the GED exam. One expressed interest in becoming a pharmacy technician, and the other planned to study graphic art and web design.

third participant planned to begin community college the following summer.<sup>11</sup>

### Employment Activities

At the time of the interviews, just under half of the participants (14 youth) were employed or in a job training program (Table 4, next page).

#### Employed Youth

All of the employed youth in our study were employed in low-wage jobs that offered minimal room for professional growth. As Table 4 shows, participants were employed in a number of fields: security, fast food, customer service, food service, and one was working as a motivational speaker<sup>12</sup>.

Equally noteworthy is the fact that 66.7% of the employed youth were looking for either a second job or a higher paying job. For instance, the participant who was employed as a security guard at the time of the interview expressed wanting to “upgrade” his job and described a typical day for him as follows: “Well, like I said, I work every day. I go to work Sunday through Thursday. Ah, I been on the Internet a lot. Then I’ll drop [an]other job application.”

**Table 4 Employment Status of Interviewed Youth**

Employment Status	Youth (n=32)
Employed	6 (18.8%)
Security industry	1 (3.1%)
Fast food industry	2 (6.3%)
Customer service	1 (3.1%)
Food service	1 (3.1%)
Motivational speaker	1 (3.1%)
Looking for a second job or higher paying job	4 (12.5%, 66.7% of employed youth)
Employed <i>before</i> entering homeless youth program	1 (3.1%, 17% of employed youth)
Employed <i>after</i> entering homeless youth program	5 (15.6%, 83% of employed youth)
Job Training Program	8 (25%)
Paid Internship	6 (21.9%)
Unemployed, Not in Job Training Program	18 (56.3%)
Actively looking for work	12 (37.5%)
Not looking for work	6 (18.8%)
Pregnant	2 (6.3%)
Waiting to receive Social Security benefits <sup>1</sup>	1 (3.1%)
Demands of school	1 (3.1%)
Waiting for work permit	1 (3.1%)
Going to the Army	1 (3.1%)

<sup>1</sup> Given Social Security disability eligibility requirements, we assume this really was SSI.

<sup>11</sup> It was unclear whether one participant was preparing eventually to re-enroll in high school or to attend college, but continued education was an expressed goal.

<sup>12</sup> An individual from a youth organization heard this participant speak at a meeting about her life experiences and hired her on the spot to be a motivational speaker, a job that allows this young person to speak to groups of youth about relevant issues.

Additionally, one of the two youth who worked in the fast food industry actively was looking for higher paying work, and the participant who worked part-time in customer service was hoping to find a job in security. The young woman employed as a motivational speaker also was looking for a second job at the time of the interview.

Almost all of the employed participants (five youth, 83.3%) found work after entering a homeless youth program. Only one participant, who for three years had been an employee in the food service department at a hospital, was employed before becoming a resident of a youth program.

### Youth in Job Training

A quarter of the participants (8 youth, 25%) were in a job training program at the time of the study. Six of these youth were in paid internships, and the two youth without internships were actively looking for work. According to the youth, these job training programs were designed to prepare young people for specific careers by way of skills training and, for three-quarters of the youth in job training programs, a paid internship. For example, one youth was in a job training program called Year Up, which connected him with a six-month paid internship with JP Morgan as a Tech Project Analyst with the intended goal of securing a job at this site. This youth described Year Up in the following way:

*[Year Up is a] one year intensive training program. So for six months we train in a variety of things but mostly we train in professionalism, business communication, and computer information systems. And, you know, for six months, we do all this stuff, we learn extensively, and, you know, we role play as to how we should act in environments. Professionalism, computer information systems, we go over training, data bases systems...*

Some of the other youth who were in similar job training programs that connected them to paid internships reflected on how well these internships matched their personal interests and career goals. For instance, one participant who was interested in social work was placed in a paid internship at a social service agency through her job training program. Another youth with a passion for the environment had a one-year paid internship with Green Corps, an organization that trains individuals to become environmental activists.

### Unemployed Youth Not in Job Training

A little over half of the participants (18 youth, 56.3%) were unemployed and not in a job training program when the study was conducted. More than half of the unemployed youth in our study (12 youth), however, reported that they actively were looking for work. Of this group, two youth had upcoming job interviews, and two youth were waiting to hear back from prospective employers. One young person described his search for a job in the following way: “Yeah, I’ve been looking for jobs. I always gotta stay on the job search because, you know, you never know what jobs come unless you go find them.”

About a third of the unemployed participants (6 youth, 18.8%) were not actively looking for work at the time of the interviews. Two youth were pregnant and indicated in their interviews

that they intended to join the workforce after the birth of their children; one youth was waiting to be “approved for Social Security”<sup>13</sup>; one youth was waiting for his work permit; one youth stated that he wanted to concentrate on his studies before looking for work; and one youth was entering the Army.

### **The Intersection of Education and Employment**

When education and employment were considered together, we saw that the vast majority of participants were either in school, employed, or in a job training program. Additionally, four participants were engaged in some combination of education and employment activities, as one youth was employed and in school, and three youth were in job training programs and in school. We also saw that four participants were involved neither in school nor in an employment activity; that is, they were unemployed and were not enrolled in school or a job training program.

### **Goals and Attitudes**

Participants were goal-oriented and focused on developing their future plans which were, for the majority of youth in our study, to graduate from school, secure or maintain employment, and find stable housing.

What also became clear from the youth’s stories was that their plans were deliberate, intentional, and focused, with the desired outcome being self-sufficiency and independence. For instance, one participant discussed her passion for forensic science. Before pursuing this career, however, she planned to receive her CNA in order to provide her with the economic security to return to school. According to this participant:

*Once I get established with my own place and, you know, stuff for my kids, then I’m a go back and start my career. ‘Cause that’s what I want to do. But CNA is something, you know, just so I can make a little money at first, ‘cause I don’t want to work at McDonald’s for, like, the rest of my life.*

#### Goals

Three goals were paramount throughout the interviews: education, employment, and housing. We discuss each, in turn, below.

#### Educational goals

It was apparent from the interviews that the participants valued education and sought higher education in the hopes of securing work in their fields of interest. Indicative of this focus was one participant’s comments about his goal to obtain a Bachelor’s Degree or a Master’s Degree in business management: “I want several businesses. I want to tie in everything, all the people that I know that has skills that want businesses as well.”

Other youth discussed how establishing a career would allow them to be self-sufficient throughout their lives. One expressed an interest in a social work career in the hopes of “making enough money to care for me and my son and get my own place and stuff.” Another participant noted that graduating next year would prepare him for a career and “of course to have...a home and a car and all those good things. And a salary.”

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<sup>13</sup> Given Social Security disability eligibility requirements, we assume this really was SSI.

### Employment goals

A common theme that materialized was the participants' wish to find secure employment that would enable them to be self-reliant. Several participants discussed their wish to have, as one participant put it, "a good job, like a full time job, where I can live off." As articulated in the section on employment, 66.7% of the employed youth in our study were looking for higher paying work or a second job, thus suggesting that they were taking active measures to become self-sufficient. As one participant stated, "My goal is to just have my own place and then have a better job. Pay more than where I'm working now."

### Housing goals

Across the board, youth talked about their goals to obtain their own apartments. They frequently connected their educational and employment goals to their housing goals. That is, participants described how furthering their education would help them to secure employment, which in turn would provide them with the financial independence to pay for their own apartments. The following comment, shared by a young woman who planned to become a CNA in the near future, was indicative of the interconnectedness of youth's educational, employment, and housing goals: "It's [becoming a CNA] just something so I can, once I get my own place and stuff, then I can go back and go to school, 'cause I'll have people to watch my kids. But I'll have my own place so I won't have to be worrying about...someone else's house...'cause this is over there, like all my stuff is gonna be with me at all times." As she summarized, housing was the ultimate goal for many youth, who longed for the stability they believed obtaining their own apartments would provide.

### Young People's Attitudes

In youth discussing their goals, certain attitudinal themes emerged. These categories overlap, as participants expressed multiple attitudes. Categorization is subjective in terms of what we interpreted as independent, motivated, positive, hopeful, confident, reflective, and dedicated attitudes.

### Independent

A significant number of youth explicitly described themselves as independent and in the process of achieving self-sufficiency. For instance, participants discussed developing their goals independently of their case managers and requiring minimal assistance from program staff. One participant, who felt she was on track and very capable of staying on top of her goals, described her relationship with her case manager in the following way:

*She's very supportive, and she listens, but I'm the type of person, like, I don't really have to wait to see what another person really has to say or think for me to do what I need to do, so I'm pretty good in that area by myself. Like I know how to take initiative, you know, I don't need anyone to push me into doing anything.*

Many participants saw themselves as adults and preferred to be treated accordingly. One young person, who identified as a grown-up, discussed her beliefs on the value of being independent: "There's so much they can do, but you gotta do stuff on your own, too. But they can't do they job if they have to sit here and baby you at the same time. It's not gonna happen like that. You

grown. You here for a reason. Get yourself together; stand on your feet.” Other youth noted that their rough childhoods had propelled them into adulthood at an early age, in part by forcing them to be independent and take care of themselves.

### Motivated

The data also suggested that the youth in our study were highly motivated. As stated in several places in this report, the participants described themselves as active agents of change in their lives and highly valued taking initiative in regard to their goals and future plans. Participants discussed ways in which they created structure for themselves, which helped them stay organized and thus better able to achieve their goals. One participant described a rigid schedule he created for himself that included waking up every morning at 6 a.m. to look for jobs. He explained how each morning he created a checklist to remind himself of the tasks he needed to accomplish that particular day. He described this routine as something “that just keeps me on track. And, umm, I just have this attitude that helps me get through the day. Like, ok, I have to do this for myself. It’s about me.” Another participant described himself as someone who was “never knocked off my square.” He went on to say, “I’m always focused, and I’m always moving forward.” This was a group of young people intent on improving their lives.

### Positive

The majority of youth expressed a positive attitude toward life. As one example of this positive outlook, a number of youth shared that they had had no bad days since being in their homeless youth programs or that every day or many days had been good days or their “best day.” In one interview, a participant was asked about her best day in the program and responded:

*I don’t really look at it as having a best day in the program, I look at it as every day you wake up, and the people are here to help you, you know. Every day you wake up, every day you’re supposed to try to accomplish something. You know there really is no, every day is supposed to be a good day basically to me. Try not to have a setback day, you know, where you don’t do anything.*

Another youth described every day in the program as being the best day compared to the life he experienced before entering the program. As a homeless youth, he was often hungry and lived without parental supervision, thus forcing him to look after himself at a young age, which he described as “very, very, very, very hard.” This participant was unable to identify any bad days in the program.

### Hopeful

Another takeaway point from the data was the youth’s sense that they were moving forward. How participants talked about their best days in the program also was instructive here, as several described their best days as days when something made them feel motivated and thus hopeful for the future. One youth, for instance, described her best day in the program as the day she was accepted into a program to complete her high school education. Another participant’s best day was when she received her GED, and the program staff celebrated her accomplishment by treating her to a meal at her favorite restaurant. This participant further explained that the day was special to her because she felt proud of herself. She stated, “You can still succeed, makes it better, you know what I’m saying? I was, got my GED, all that, you know? Went to school.”

### Confident

A number of participants explicitly expressed feeling more confident and self-assured since entering a homeless youth program. These participants described experiencing positive transformations that led to increased self-esteem and more self-respect. Such transformations were directly tied to accomplishing a specific goal. One participant, for example, was in a GED program and taking honors classes. She described herself as being “really wild” before entering the program but started to take her education seriously knowing that it could potentially take her far. This participant “never thought I would be in an honors class, so I’m really proud of myself.” Similarly, another young person initially believed he was going to end up a “thug,” but since entering the program and being one of the youngest residents in the program to complete his GED, he felt more confident. He stated, “You can always think better of yourself. You can do better with your life.”

### Reflective

There was also evidence to suggest that the youth in our study were self-reflective, as a small number explicitly reflected on ways they had changed or grown since entering the program and discussed their ability to view things in new ways. For some youth, this included an emerging acceptance of the past. One young person described growing up in an abusive household and being confused and hurt by her mother’s erratic behavior. Since entering the program, this participant had been trying to make sense of her past and understand her mother’s behavior. She came to the conclusion that her mother “doesn’t know how to be a mom” and asserted, “When I have kids, I would never ever do the things she did. So when I have kids I’m going to love them and care for ’em, something that my mom did not do, but I know I can do it.” This participant went on to say that she also had reconciled with her father since entering the program and had forgiven him for mistreating her. She and her father had agreed to communicate better and not resort to violence in an effort to “do something better with ourself.” Another youth discussed feeling angry about his past, particularly circumstances around being a homeless youth. However, this young man expressed feeling “far from that” and identified this change as “very beneficial.”

### Dedicated

A few participants also talked about specific ways they tried to help others and improve their communities. One participant shared her frustration and sadness at the problems she observed in her community, particularly around violence and drugs. She expressed a desire to help people involved in this lifestyle better themselves and was considering community activism as a career. She discussed how her grandmother, who had been involved in the Civil Rights Movement, encouraged her to become a leader in the community. She described being rebuffed by individuals on the street for her candor, but she continued to speak to such people because she “sees so much pain, so much agony, so much things that are going on in their personal lives, why they’re doing it.” Two other participants described taking active roles in their program to mediate disputes between residents in an attempt to create a supportive and peaceful living environment.



## Life Challenges

As part of the interviews, we asked youth a specific question about what life challenges or difficulties they faced. In this section, we report on their self-identified life challenges and difficulties.

### Interpersonal Relationships

The most common challenges participants identified centered on relationships. For many, interpersonal relationships were a significant source of stress. Nearly half of the participants (13 youth) identified familial relationships as a life challenge.

One young woman reflected on the hardship of not being able to depend on two people on whom she once relied:

*Well, the biggest one [life challenge] would have to be my mom passing. That didn't really affect me till I got older. Hmm we lived with my grandmother, and, like, we had all the material things, like, we had all of that, but I don't know. Our household was really unaffectionate...But, yeah, that is, like, one day I woke up, everything is fine, and the next day I woke up, it was damn, always problems, always problems. I think it all happened when my grandmother got diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Mmm I really started to pay attention to that more, 'cause I felt like now I am losing someone else that's really special and close to me. Hmm that is the second, like, challenge. Dealing with my grandmother having Alzheimer's. That's really hard.*

A young man shared a similar life challenge:

*Like I said, I didn't have a parent around. But I technically had an older brother. I guess qualifies for being a parent, I guess. But that was a really big challenge. Because you also have in the back of your mind, what if I had a mother around or something? What if I knew her? Would anything be different? I mean, it wasn't really a challenge, but it was there. Some things were challenging, though, about not having a parent. Went through a lot of struggles.*

The one participant who identified as transgendered shared how this identity contributed to challenges in relating to family members, specifically this participant's child:

*I'm transgender. I'm a female and a male. Today I'm a female, and every day I'm going to dress like this 'cause I'm getting ready for the [gay pride] parade...and then, like, if I see my daughter, I'ma have [to] dress as a guy, so she still gonna see me and stuff, but all this other stuff she's not gonna see. So I'm kinda like trying to hide the female parts 'cause she can't be confused, because then can't tell who her daddy is.*

In short, even though youth generally showed great resilience in recovering from disrupted households and moving on from harmful familial relationships, many indicated that managing current relationships was an ongoing challenge.

### Pregnancy and Parenting

Many of the young women who were pregnant or parents described how becoming pregnant posed a life challenge.<sup>14</sup> For instance, one participant answered the question about life challenges and difficulties by replying, “Moving from house to house and having a baby at a young age. Being hard for me, having the baby was hard for me to stay in school. So I had to go to the alternative school to graduate, so I could get my high school diploma.”

In response to the same question, a young woman at another program said, “I’m pregnant, so that’s a lot to deal with...it changed a lot of things for me. Like instead of going to school, I don’t know, like, it would be hard to do that. So just my pregnancy right now and then dealing with my dad.”

Another participant identified a life challenge as:

*Being a mom...I was nineteen when I got pregnant, and I was living with my sister, and she told me, like, once I had my baby, I would have to move out, because there wasn’t any room...So, at first, you know, everything was all good, ’cause me and my child’s father were together, and he had a job and stuff. So we were gonna get our own place for it. That didn’t work out, so I felt like I was alone, and I had to think, well, like, okay, where are me and my baby gonna live? And that was really stressful during my pregnancy.*

These young women indicated how pregnancy and caring for young children impacted their housing stability and forced them to put some key plans on hold, as they often had to postpone educational and employment goals.

### Educational Barriers

A number of participants described how barriers to pursuing their educational plans posed life challenges. As we note above in the Goals and Attitudes section (see p. 28), participants viewed furthering their education as an essential step on their paths to becoming independent. Thus, young people discussed how any setbacks that delayed their educational plans were significant. For one young woman who planned to return to college, problems with her financial aid were a noteworthy life challenge. She commented:

*I owe school money that financial aid paid for. So if I don’t pay that, I don’t get financial aid I guess. I don’t know. I haven’t even looked into that yet. I still got to look into that. But then that’s gonna mess me up if I do want to go back to school...I don’t know, I’ve just been getting emails, and I got a letter that said I owe money, but I don’t have the money to pay yet. So, I think that’s the only thing that’ll mess up school is if I can’t get financial aid.*

Another young woman candidly discussed how motivating herself to finish school was one of her main challenges:

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<sup>14</sup> Nine of the 10 participants who were parents identified as women. The 10<sup>th</sup> participant identified as transgendered. That participant’s struggles with parenting are discussed above in the Interpersonal Relationships section (see p. 32).

*I got a problem with finishing school. I like, I don't know why school does not work for me. I think it's just high school in general. Like, I don't know, I just can't finish it. I mean, I can, 'cause I'm this close, but when I get close, I back out. I don't know why, it's just something I've done since I've gotten in high school. It's a challenge I just can't seem to get. Even though I try to get to it every time, it never seems to work. Even if I put my all into it, then when I get to the point, 'I'm tired now.' It just go back to the same way it was before I started putting my all into it. I just got that problem.*

### Employment Barriers

As we discuss in greater detail below (see p. 63-66 in the Services and Reflections section), participants expressed frustration with the overall lack of available employment opportunities in Chicago. Similar to education, youth viewed employment as an essential prerequisite to independence and thus recognized barriers to employment as significant life challenges.

### Homelessness

A few young people explicitly identified homelessness as a significant life challenge. One participant summarized this challenge when she responded to the question about what difficulties she has faced:

*Stability. Stability...Well, I was homeless from March till June, no July. Then I moved into [another homeless youth program] ...from July to October. Then I left there, and I moved with my best friend. Then I ended up moving with my baby's father. That didn't work out, so I end up moving here. So I am homeless again. So I think the struggles have been technically stability and somewhere to be stable at.*

### Mental Health Conditions

Although youth largely did not identify as having mental health concerns, a few commented on mental health in discussing life challenges. One young woman, for instance, explained that she no longer was able to take medication to treat her bi-polar disorder because she was pregnant. Another participant commented on needing to see a doctor because of bad dreams he had been having that interfered with his ability to sleep.

Despite limited mention of mental health concerns throughout the interviews, one young woman indicated that mental health needs were a predominant issue in her program. She explained:

*Everybody be wrapped tight that live up in here. Everybody on some type of medication, or they need to be on some type of medication. We all a little off. Like seriously, no joke. We all little off. There's something wrong with all of us in the brain. We either all bipolar together, we all depressed together, we either all angry together, it's something off. We either got anger problem, bipolar, depression, anxiety. Something's wrong with all of us, low self-esteem. Suicidal. It's something wrong with all of us. Yeah. It's bad. I mean, you're ain't gonna pick it up unless you really get to know the people in the building and you be like, 'Dang! For real dog? That's how you is.'*

### Medical Conditions

About five participants identified medical problems as a life challenge, specifically when these medical issues interfered with their ability to pursue their goals. Indicative of this situation, one young woman described a life challenge as, “My sickness. I just think, uh, sometimes I get sick far too much. I have to, like, put a hold on certain things because of the time I might have to be in the hospital.” Medical concerns, specifically when youth were uninsured, were a continuous source of stress.

### Program Rules

In a few cases, participants described how adjusting to the rules at the homeless youth programs was a challenging process. They commonly expressed frustration with programs’ curfews, although they acknowledged the need for this rule. Still, youth described struggling to make it back to programs before curfew and how anxiety-producing these situations were.

Another young man reflected on how his struggle with following rules, in general, had been a challenge throughout his life. In response to the question about life challenges and difficulties, he said, “Following the rules. Because, like, if I just did what I was supposed to and not just did stuff like, you know, just random stuff, I think I would have had like a real easy life. You know what I’m saying? That’s about it. Just follow the rules.”

### Undeterred by Life Challenges

It is important to keep in mind that even when youth identified life challenges, the vast majority also discussed ways they actively were addressing the challenges or had overcome them. They frequently spoke in a matter-of-fact way about significant hardships and demonstrated how they were undeterred by these challenges and difficulties. The following comment was representative of this trend: “It’s a lot of life challenges, I mean, but who doesn’t have a lot of life challenges? I have a younger sister who is on drugs, and, you know, she does all types of things that are just terrible. That’s what, making other people’s problems my problem, like, oh man, I was really bad with that.”

Youth routinely brushed off severe life challenges and difficulties by describing how they were not that bad. In this way, youth communicated a forward-thinking and goal-oriented outlook. Very few participants presented as feeling defeated or overwhelmed by the challenges they faced. It was much more common for youth to express optimism in the face of these challenges and a belief in their ability to overcome them. In fact, when asked about life challenges, many of the youth indicated that the challenges they faced were minimal. During discussions with homeless youth providers, some explained that youth’s positive, proactive attitudes were necessary, since homeless youth must have creativity and energy to survive. If youth had become overwhelmed by their challenging circumstances, they likely would have not made it to their current programs. Reflective of youth’s survival strategies, the story that emerged from the interviews was one of hope and resilience. The young people, while describing significant life challenges, presented themselves as active agents of change in their lives.

## **Paths to Current Programs**

Above, we provided a descriptive picture of the study participants, their challenges, goals, and family circumstances. In this section we explain the different paths that youth followed to reach their current programs.

Given the instability of youth's family lives and the complicated process to enter youth housing programs (discussed in detail below in the Process to Enter Programs section, p. 41-49), it was not surprising that only two youth in our study (6.3%) moved directly from their homes of origin to their current programs. It was much more common for young people to go through several housing options, moving from one living situation to another, before entering their current programs. It also was not surprising that youth's homes of origin were not necessarily their parents' homes. Some participants described living with older siblings, relatives, or adopted families and becoming homeless when they no longer could stay at these places. Although something prompted them to leave or be removed from their parents' home, that event was not always the beginning of their homelessness or their "paths" to their current programs.

### Plotting the Participants' Paths

As part of analyzing the paths that participants followed into their current homeless youth programs, we attempted to plot each participant's path, noting the individual "stops" along the way. The paths of 10 participants (31.3%) were so complicated and ambiguous that we were unable to plot fully each of their individual paths. To explain, for eight of these youth, it was unclear how many times the participants stayed at each stop they mentioned or the order of the stops at which they stayed. Two youth described multiple episodes of homelessness, and we were thus unclear when the path to their current program started. We did not want to dismiss earlier homeless episodes that youth took time to discuss in their interviews, but we did not have enough detailed information to plot the exact, complete order of stops these two youth followed throughout multiple homeless episodes that spanned many years. Our inability to plot the individual stops for nearly one-third of interview participants underscores the complexity and chaotic nature of youth's living experiences prior to reaching their current programs.

For the remaining 22 participants (68.8%), we plotted the paths they followed into their current housing programs, including the individual "stops" (i.e. family members' or friends' homes, shelter programs) where they stayed along the way. Please see Appendix A for a visual representation of these paths. The 10 youth whose paths we were not able to plot completely are represented in the "Bouncing Around/Multiple Stops" box toward the bottom of the visual.

Despite the variability of participants' paths to their current programs, as well as the difficulty in understanding the progression of many of these paths, a number of themes emerged.

### Themes in Participants' Paths

Table 6 (next page) provides a breakdown of the various places participants stayed along their paths to their current programs. These categories overlap, as youth frequently stayed in multiple types of places between becoming homeless and moving into their current programs. For example, a participant who stayed with a family member at one time may also have stayed on the streets at another time.

Importance of family and friends

Youth frequently turned to family members and friends/boyfriends/girlfriends for temporary shelter. In fact, half of the participants reported staying with a family member, 12 participants reported staying with a friend, and five participants reported staying with their boyfriend, child’s father, or girlfriend prior to entering their current programs.

The figure in Appendix A shows that this trend was common among the 22 participants whose paths we were able to plot completely. At Stop 1, half of the 20 depicted participants stayed with a family member or friend/boyfriend/girlfriend. Nine of the 11 participants did so at Stop 2 (including family, adopted family, friends/boyfriend/girlfriend, and home of origin). Five of the seven participants did so at Stop 3 (including friends and home of origin). Half of the four participants did so at Stop 4 (including family and home of origin). Finally, the only participant at Stop 5 stayed with a family member.

Housing arrangements with family and friends often were unstable, though, as youth reported bouncing from one family member’s and/or friend’s house to another due to conflict, violence, and limited resources. Approximately 23 participants (71.9%) discussed this type of situation. Thus, youth encountered some of the same factors that contributed to them leaving or being pushed out of their homes of origin.

**Table 6 “Stops” on Youth’s “Paths” to Current Housing Programs**

Stop	Youth <sup>1</sup>
Family	16 (50%)
Friends	12 (38%)
Boyfriend/child’s father/girlfriend	5 (16%)
Youth housing program	9 (28%)
Adult/emergency shelter	5 (16%)
Outside/streets	4 (13%)
Immigrant detention center	2 (6%)
Own apartment	2 (6%)
Juvenile detention center	1 (3%)
Family shelter	1 (3%)

<sup>1</sup> These categories represent portions of all 32 participants’ paths to their current programs. These categories overlap.

One young woman described a particularly stressful living environment she and her young daughter endured while staying with the child’s father’s family. She explained:

*I went there, and her [referring to her daughter] father, her father’s mother, she is a drug addict, and she is an alcohol addict. His aunty is drug and alcohol*

*addict...Her [referring to her daughter] grandmother, grandma's house...it's a real nice house, but you can tell the years of drugs and alcohol, it's been messing up the house real bad.*

She described general disorder, lack of cleanliness, and frequent fights in which family members often called the police on each other. She explained her decision to leave:

*This is when I left. This was the last day I was there. When they got into a drunken fight and my daughter was sitting on a bed in her dad's room, which is my room, nobody came in my room. I kept my room clean. That's why no one came in. And then they came in, they was fighting everywhere, and they hit her [referring to her daughter] in the head. A TV was thrown at her head, so that was the last day I was there, and I left.*

While this story was one of the more severe circumstances that a participant shared, persistent conflict and overcrowding ended many young people's temporary stays with family and friends.

*Grandmothers' limited support.* In contrast to the internal conflict and chaos of living arrangements with family members and friends, four participants (12.5%) discussed how external factors limited where they were able to stay. These participants temporarily stayed with their grandmothers, in what were generally supportive environments. For these youth, their grandmothers were an important source of emotional and material support. They were unable to live with their grandmothers for an extended period of time, however, because their grandmothers lived in buildings where they were not allowed to have additional tenants or long-term guests.

One participant, for instance, shared that while his grandmother was not happy that he left his mother's home, she understood why he did so and took him in for a few nights. He explained, "I couldn't stay at Grandma's. Grandma stays at a retirement home. And they did not find out I was staying at Grandma's because I snuck in sometimes... Like the max I'm supposed to stay is like three days." While this participant was able to move directly into his current housing program from his grandmother's home, another participant struggled greatly after leaving his grandmother's home. He recalled that after a fight with his stepfather, "I got put out. I actually went to my grandmother's house, but she stays in a retirement center, so it's not like I could sleep there every day. So it just ended up I was just roaming the streets. I was just homeless."

### *Multiple stops*

As noted above, the vast majority of participants had multiple stops on their paths to their current programs. As delineated in Table 6, they stayed in different types of housing, institutional settings, and places.

This theme was evident among the 22 participants whose paths we were able to plot completely in Appendix A. From the figure in Appendix A, we see that the majority of the 22 participants moved into their current youth housing programs in one (two participants), two (nine participants), or three (four participants) stops. Three participants reached their current programs

in four stops, three more reached their programs in five stops, and the final participant reached the current program in six stops. It is worth noting again that these numbers reflect only the participants whose paths were clear enough for us to plot. The 10 participants in the “Bouncing Around/Multiple Stops” box likely experienced more than six stops. At least one of these 10 participants reached her current program in nine stops.

### Circuitous routes

Another strong theme regarding participants’ paths was that many youth’s routes were circuitous. That is, from one stop to the next, they returned to places where they previously had stayed. Appendix A shows how this trend applied to the 22 participants’ paths that we were able to plot completely. For instance, we see in the Stop 2 box that three participants returned temporarily to their homes of origin, two participants did so at Stop 3, and one participant did so at Stop 4.

### Previous stays at youth housing programs

Table 6 also highlights that over one-quarter of interview participants stayed at a youth housing program prior to moving into their current programs. Participants identified a variety of reasons for leaving these programs. Two young women shared that they became pregnant while staying in programs that did not house pregnant women, and they thus had to find new housing. Three participants had graduated from a youth housing program into their current program. In other words, they were housed in different programs of the same agency. Another participant moved from a shorter-term to a longer-term youth housing program at a different agency. A young woman, mentioned above, had stayed at Job Corps at one point.

Finally, one participant shared that her current stay in her current program was her second stay there<sup>15</sup>. At the end of her first stay, she was discharged to a two-year youth housing program. She left after about two days, though, because she did not feel comfortable in the new program. She described it as “really independent,” since participants were supposed to be employed and thus provide for themselves entirely in terms of food, clothing, transportation, household items, and other daily living expenses. She was not employed and thus had a difficult time. She missed the material support her previous program provided. She explained:

*It was really independent, so it was hard for me. Like, they didn’t have towels and stuff, and I don’t have money to go to Target and like get my own stuff. Like, here [her current program] they know you don’t have a job, and it’s more emergency. So they have everything you need, like shampoo. But over there, they didn’t. So, I wasn’t comfortable. And everyone had jobs and buying food and coming in, so then I left.*

She added that she was learning from this experience and focusing on finding employment even though she was pregnant at the time of the interview. She added, “I jumped into [the more independent program] without a job, and it was horrible. I messed that completely up, because you can’t go into a real two-year program if you don’t have a job, because it’s really independent.”

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<sup>15</sup> One additional participant did not specify under what conditions he left his previous youth program.



### Less typical stops

Participants also indicated a number of “less typical” stops on their paths to their current programs, including outside/on the streets (four participants), immigrant detention centers (two participants), their own apartments (two participants), a juvenile detention center (one participant), and a family shelter (one participant). Most of these stops were discussed above, in the section on reasons for participants’ homelessness. Because we did not discuss instances when youth stayed in their own apartments or on the street above, we provide a more detailed discussion of each stop below.

Youth’s own apartments. Regarding the two youth who lived in their own apartments, it is important to note that these arrangements were somewhat precarious. One young woman who moved out of her mother’s home at age 17 because they could not get along, stayed in three different apartments over the course of about two years. She moved out of her second apartment because her landlord was not doing what he was supposed to do. She stayed in her third apartment for only about four months. Her cousin moved in and was going to help with bills. The cousin ultimately was not able to help, however, and after the participant lost her job providing homecare services, she was unable to pay the rent and was evicted. She thus moved back in with her mother and then with her best friend before moving into her current youth housing program. The other participant who lived in her own apartment is the young woman noted above who had approximately nine stops along the path to her current program. She had lived temporarily with her boyfriend in their own apartment, but when he was arrested and placed in jail, she moved in with his parents. In short, even though these young people lived in their own apartments for limited periods of time, they continued to deal with unstable housing.

Trauma of staying on the streets. While only four participants (12.5%) shared that they had stayed outside or on the streets for some period of time, it is noteworthy that, at times, these four young people were unable to find any immediate housing resources or personal supports. One young woman explained that she stayed “technically, [at] a lot of my friends’ houses. Some nights I didn’t go to sleep at all. I would just be outside until the next day. Then go back to my friend’s house like I went somewhere.” Not only did this participant face the dangers of being alone on the streets overnight, she also felt the stigma of not having anywhere to stay and tried to hide her situation from her friends who provided limited support.

The impact of the experience of staying outside overnight was significant and still weighed on some participants. In fact, one interview participant shared that she still had nightmares about the time she spent on the streets. Participants in one focus group also provided vivid recollections about how scary it was to stay outside and revealed strategies to stay safe. One young man described riding the Blue Line overnight:

*I just go to sleep and from Forest Park to O’Hare. You got to keep waking up and transferring. Everybody is doing it. But yeah, you can talk to people. I’ve talked to a couple of people just like, “What song are you listening to?” Just chilling. “What time are you going to hop off?” “I’m going to hop off at 5 as soon as other lines start running.” But not really,*

*people are there to just, see, basically because everybody is just trying to find a little spot. Comfortable and warm.*

Another participant in this focus group advised, “You don’t want to be outside in the winter, or you are going to die. I know a person who died...he didn’t have the proper clothing, and he got frost bite really bad, and he just died. It’s sad, and it’s real. That is why you have so many train hoppers.”

These participants’ reflections about staying on the streets provided insights about what homeless youth who have not accessed the programs in our study likely are experiencing. Their reflections served as an important reminder about the urgency of connecting homeless youth to safe, supportive residential services.

## **PART II. YOUTH’S EXPERIENCES IN THE HOMELESS YOUTH SYSTEM**

To this point, we have reviewed the circumstances that contributed to participants’ homelessness; the status of their familial relationships after entering youth housing programs; participants’ educational and employment status, as well as their life challenges, goals, and attitudes; and the various circuitous paths most participants followed before moving into their current programs. In this section, we discuss participants’ experiences in the homeless youth system. We begin by describing the processes participants followed to find and access youth housing programs. We then focus on participants’ experiences once they entered their current programs, specifically their relationships with staff members and other residents; their safety inside and outside of the programs; and their assessments of programs’ services.

### **Process to Enter Programs**

The youth in our study revealed that gaining entry to their current programs was a complicated, at times confusing process that required initiative and perseverance. Young people discussed having to research programs to learn what was available and what seemed to best meet their needs. After connecting with a program, they had to navigate the intake process and then, in many cases, diligently maintain contact with the program and find other immediate housing while remaining on a waiting list.

### Finding Programs

Interview and focus group participants reported drawing on a number of overlapping resources in finding their current youth housing programs. They described their planned entry to their current programs and how they carefully weighed their options about which programs to contact. In describing what they would tell a newcomer to Chicago about the homeless system, their advice included to know what services programs provide and to “do your research. Don’t just jump into the water without testing it.” Youth researched programs in a variety of formal and informal ways.

### Past homeless experiences

Past experiences with homelessness contributed to some youth’s knowledge of the overall homeless system in Chicago. In fact, the majority of participants (56%) reported having multiple

experiences with seeking shelter in the homeless system in Chicago. Past programs included youth, adult, family, and emergency shelters.

In some cases, youth lived in these programs immediately before moving into their current programs, but in other cases, youth had lived in these programs during an earlier homeless episode. Participants drew on their personal knowledge to connect with their current programs, as their past experiences helped them know what to look for and what to avoid in a housing program.

#### Word of mouth

About 10 participants (31.3%) shared that they learned about their current programs by word of mouth. For instance, six youth (18.8%) recalled that past or current program participants, who were friends or relatives, provided them with information about the program. For example, one participant explained how she had reconnected with a friend, and:

*I was currently going through a situation at home and, um, she was telling me you know about how she [was] stayin' in her apartment and how she got her apartment...She was currently in the program at the time. And then they had no more room, I guess. They had no more room, and they were too full. So she moved out after a couple of months, later. And, um, when they called me up for my interview, you know, they gave me her apartment, after she moved out.*

Four participants (12.5%) shared that people whom they trusted, such as family members, a boss, and a pastor, encouraged them to look into their current housing programs. Although these individuals were not current or past residents of the programs, they were familiar with the programs' services and suggested that the programs could offer participants help in dealing with their situations. As one participant shared, "We was brought here through our pastor, thank God for him, and he was like, 'I think you should go here to get off the streets, 'cause the streets is not really safe.' So we stayed in a lot things in the streets, so much stuff. I actually have nightmares about it sometimes, but, um, if it wasn't for him, I wouldn't have been brought to this facility."

In short, youth relied on their personal networks to secure housing options. Given the influence of their friends, family, and trusted adults, programs' reputations are extremely important. In some cases, the youth whom they serve are their most effective outreach component.

#### Multiple program exposure

Youth also discussed receiving more formal referrals to their current programs from staff members at other programs (residential and non-residential) with which they were involved. Youth benefitted from helpful, knowledgeable advocates who were able to refer them to the most appropriate programs.

Adult shelters. Three youth (9.4%) moved from adult shelters to their current youth programs because advocates suggested youth housing would be more beneficial for

them<sup>16</sup>. One young man explained that a caseworker at the adult shelter where he stayed referred him to his current program. He shared:

*And since I was a, basically like a, a young participant at their [adult] program, I was like the youngest, and he thought I would feel more comfortable if I was with people around my age group, so they sent me here. And he contacted [current youth housing program], and I moved out here about two weeks later.*

Similarly, another young man learned of the same youth housing program from a caseworker at the Department of Family and Supportive Services (DFSS). He explained:

*[DFSS] directed me to this program. They sent me over here and gave me a referral, told me to go check out [current youth housing program] if you lookin' for housin' 'cause we don't want you in adult shelters anymore or whatever and hopefully they'll put you in there immediately. So that's how I heard about it.*

Youth services. About 12 participants (37.5%) mentioned being referred to their current programs by another youth program. These referring programs included residential programs that provide referrals when they do not have openings, as well as outreach programs for homeless youth and non-residential youth programs, such as teen pregnancy/parenting programs.

Outreach services to homeless youth emerged as a particularly important form of assistance on which many participants relied (See “Outreach Teams to Homeless Youth” box on next page). Outreach workers introduced and connected young people who were homeless or at-risk of homelessness to services by meeting youth in their communities. That is, youth were not necessarily seeking out these services. Rather, some participants explained how they first met their outreach workers when the workers were passing out informational materials, as well as food and hygiene packets, in their communities. Youth’s chance encounters with outreach workers connected them to a host of supportive services and referrals that helped them in ways they did not even know were available. As one young woman shared:

*I met [outreach worker] ...in a Walgreens parking lot. And he just came up to me, like, “If you know somebody who’s homeless, give them this card, tell them to call this number.” And then he, like, was telling me about it. And I was like, “Well, I’m in this situation right now.” So I had my first meeting outside on the corner, that was kind [of like] my first meeting as an outreach patient<sup>17</sup>.*

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<sup>16</sup> Two of these young people moved directly into their current programs. The third participant moved from an adult shelter to a different youth program and then to the current youth program.

<sup>17</sup> She moved into the agency’s housing program after being on the waiting list for about one year.

Not only did outreach workers provide youth with referrals to housing programs, they also provided youth with critical material and emotional support. Participants described how ongoing support from outreach workers helped them to manage precarious housing situations and connect to homeless youth programs. One participant, for instance, described the importance of his regular meetings with an outreach worker while he waited for a spot to open at his current program:

*Every other week I had a meeting. What we did was, she [his outreach worker] made sure, you know, she just made sure that everything was going all right with my living situation that I was in and if I needed any help with, um, she was not necessarily a counselor, but, you know, everything that was going on at my, you know, the house that I was staying in, you know, we talked about that. And, uh, she talked about, you know, if I have to get in how they could help me with my case, with, uh, school, with employment, with, you know, every resource I needed was available to me, um, once I get in. And, uh, so it was like a check-up every other week. She*

### **Outreach Teams to Homeless Youth**

One program included in our study stood out as having an extensive youth outreach team that passes out information on the agency's different programs and provides immediate assistance, such as food, clothes, hygiene packets, and referrals to youth who are homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless. Youth can meet several times with the same outreach worker to receive material assistance and emotional support.

This outreach component allows youth to build a relationship with the agency and develop a sense of its transitional housing program before they move in.

One participant, who had since moved into the agency's transitional housing program, reflected on the ongoing services he had received from an outreach worker, who provided him with information about a number of agencies that operate youth housing programs. This participant explained that he had preferred to wait for an opening in his current program, though, because he already had a connection to it through his outreach worker. He explained, "This [program] was one [where] I at least knew somebody, so I was a little bit more comfortable knowing at least one person than knowing none."

In sum, the outreach services provide an important way to connect with youth and provide youth with much-needed support to begin dealing with the chaos in their lives before they even move in to a housing program. These services find youth where they are, oftentimes on the streets, and bring them in contact with supportive service providers.

*would sometimes call and, uh, check on me so...[The outreach staff] specifically worked with all the clients that were in between.*

As these examples illustrate, outreach services were an important stabilizing force in homeless youth's lives, especially given the tumultuous period many participants experienced between becoming homeless and moving into homeless youth programs.

Schools. A surprisingly low number of interview participants, two youth (6.3%), mentioned receiving referrals to their current programs from school-based staff members. One participant's school counselor provided the referrals, and another participant overheard a social worker at her high school telling her friend about her current program. She then called the program on her own. Participants in one focus group mentioned learning about their current programs from their schools.

Other advocates. Two additional youth, both of whom had immigration issues, described how lawyers or advocates who were providing assistance related to these issues connected them to their current youth housing programs.

#### Youth's help-seeking

Youth described proactively seeking out services and at times navigating the homeless youth system on their own. Participants were quite resourceful in where they sought out information.

Internet. One-quarter of interviewed youth (eight participants) mentioned using the Internet to locate their current programs. In some instances, youth researched programs online to learn more about their services after hearing about them from someone else. One young man commented, "I just Googled like 'temporary living programs,' and I found that. And I already heard some about it, but I actually Googled it."

In other cases, youth first learned about their programs through Internet searches. For instance, one participant explained, "I was looking up homeless shelters on the Internet, and then I came across this one. Once I called, then I told them my situation, I was in." She then completed her intake interview and moved in shortly thereafter. Similarly, another young woman recalled:

*My process for getting into this program was kind of quick, actually, and easy. Basically I was researching transitional homes for youth adults or whatever, families, actually, at the time. But I came across the [current housing program's] logo, and I read about their program, and I liked it, and I called and came in for an interview, and I was in it just like that.*

Two participants specifically referenced using the Illinois Department of Human Services' website as a starting point for their online searches. Taken together, the participants who used the Internet to research housing options indicated that a program's online presence is incredibly important in communicating much-needed information to youth and in making a first impression about what the program can offer.

311. Only two participants (6.3%) indicated that they had called 311 for assistance with finding youth housing, and this resource was not particularly helpful for either participant. To explain, one participant was told to go to a police station or emergency room. She ultimately was referred to her current program by her caseworker at a non-residential teen pregnancy/parenting program. The other participant had a similar experience with 311. She recalled, “I found [her current youth housing program] online by myself. 311 was just, they were just giving me different numbers to call people, and those people would give me different numbers to call people, so I was just, I will just look them [up] by myself, ’cause I was getting nowhere with 311.”

DFSS. Only two participants (6.3%) discussed turning to DFSS for assistance with finding youth housing. In contrast to the reported experiences with 311, both young people assessed DFSS workers as helpful in connecting them to appropriate programs. In addition to the young man mentioned above, whom DFSS helped move from adult shelters to a youth housing program, a young woman shared a positive experience working with a staff member at the DFSS Community Service Center near where she lived. She recalled that the DFSS worker “called around [to various housing programs], but I liked this one [her current youth housing program] out of all of them. She told me about it, how it was and stuff like that, so I just chose this program.” This DFSS worker provided critical advocacy by sharing information that empowered this young woman to have a sense of agency over where she would live.

Focus group participants provided mixed reviews of their experiences with DFSS. Some noted DFSS’s limitations, saying it was geared toward adults and referred all people to emergency shelters rather than transitional housing programs. Additionally, some participants were critical of the long wait time to have a DFSS van pick them up and transport them to a shelter. Other participants, however, shared positive assessments about helpful DFSS workers who understood that adult shelters were inappropriate for youth and took the time to connect participants to the most appropriate shelters, such as youth, family, and domestic violence shelters.

### Entering Programs

Once youth located housing programs in which they were interested, in many cases they underwent a complicated process to actually move into a program. Navigating this process required skill and perseverance. The majority of participants reported that they had considered multiple programs before entering their current ones but did not go to those programs for various reasons. Some youth described being on waiting lists that would have taken years to move through. Some also discussed not qualifying for certain programs based on their eligibility requirements, such as having to be employed or referred by another shelter. A couple of participants recalled reaching out to housing programs but never receiving a reply.

We also learned from youth that the intake process varied from program to program and even from applicant to applicant. That is, some youth described being put on a waiting list and then interviewing for a placement in the program after a spot opened up. Other youth described completing a formal intake interview and then being contacted by program staff when a spot opened up. Other youth described going through multiple telephone interviews and meetings

before completing a formal intake interview. What is important to keep in mind is that youth often applied to more than one housing program at a time. Thus, it could become confusing to remember which program required what steps to complete a full intake.

### In-depth intake

Youth frequently described rather in-depth intake interviews, in which they were asked to share a great deal of personal information. For the most part, participants understood these interviews as a necessary part of the application process and willingly provided the requested information. As one young woman explained:

*There was an interview process, had to answer some questionnaire questions about me, my personality so they can know what type of person I am and do I go out, do I have friends, so they can know what they getting into. And then they needed my information, birth certificate, Social Security card, so they can help me find jobs and an apartment, so they can have that on file.*

In response to the interviewer's question about how she felt about this process, she replied, "It was long, but I really didn't mind because they was giving me a place to stay. So it was 3 or 4 hours, I would have sat there and did the process because they was providing me with my own apartment to stay." A young man at a different program recalled a similar intake interview:

*So basically as he interviewed me, found out my background, why I was in the situation I'm in. You know just a brief, I think I went through my whole life in there. Just so he could find out everything about me and my background, and he even asked you very, very intricate questions on, you know, your life and how long have you been homeless and everything. Really detailed.*

In response to the interviewer's question about what he thought about the intake interview, he said, "I can see a point in why he does it, but it's like, it's really detailed. I was surprised...I mean, I know why they have you talk about it, you can't just let a bunch of people in. It's like, because, there are a lot of homeless youth, and you got to be careful about who you put in there."

### Waiting lists

Many participants discussed spending some time on their current programs' waiting lists before a spot opened up and they were able to move in. As with the intake process, the amount of time participants spent on waiting lists varied greatly. According to participants, their time on program waiting lists ranged from one day to two years. The two-year wait was an outlier. As Table 5 (next page) shows, the vast majority of youth in our study (28 youth) spent less than one year on their programs' waiting lists. Nineteen youth spent less than one month on a waiting list, and 13 youth spent between one and five days on a waiting list.

*Patient attitude.* Participants described waiting lists as another routine part of the process to enter housing programs, and some participants stressed the importance of not giving up on the program while waiting for a spot to open. For instance, one focus group participant reflected:



*It's a struggle as far as it's hard and there is a process for it. There are a lot of programs now in Chicago, and they all feel obligated to fill, so don't get discouraged as far as you going into the intake. It's a process, and you may get turned away, but you come back two or three months later, or they tell you to give them a call within the next three months. Just don't get discouraged...The beds [that] are filled are for you, so you have to keep in mind that it's not going to be like, I call them and you are in. So it's not immediate.*

Importantly, this participant affirmed that youth have a right to housing, even if they must wait to fulfill this right.

**Table 5 Wait List Times**

<b>Amount of Time on Program's Wait List</b>	<b>Youth<sup>1</sup></b>
1-5 days	13 (43%)
1-3 weeks	6 (20%)
1-3 months	5 (17%)
4-8 months	4 (13%)
1 year	1 (3%)
2 years	1 (3%)

<sup>1</sup> Two youth did not indicate the amount of time they were on a waiting list. Percentages are based on 30 participants.

*Proactive steps.* While patience was important, participants also described taking proactive steps to try to exert some influence over programs' waiting lists. Some youth consistently called their programs to inquire about open slots and their places on the waiting lists, because they felt this effort improved their chances of securing a place in the program. In some instances, youth initiated calling programs regularly to check on their spots. As one focus group participant explained, "You've got to be on your business. You've got to show them [program staff] you're about something." Proactively calling programs was a way for youth to demonstrate their commitment to the programs, their sincere interest in services, and that they were taking responsibility for their situations. Youth believed that their telephone calls showed they were serious about making positive changes in their lives.

*Emergency placement.* Participants shared that in emergency situations, some youth were able to circumvent the wait list. If youth were in danger or living on the streets, staff members, in some instances, expedited their moves into the programs. According to one focus group participant:

*The way I got in is because I had an emergency. People were trying to kill me. I had nowhere to stay. I was putting my family in danger, parties at my crib, drugs, guns, everything. I got jumped real bad to the point that they sent me to the hospital, and it was a real bad experience, so it*

*depends on the phase you are in. The urgency. If it's a real emergency that you know you are in danger, they will move you up.*

### **Youth's Ratings of Current Programs**

Although the interviews with youth were semi-structured qualitative interviews, we included some close-ended quantitative questions at the end of each interview, including questions related to three scales on caring and service quality; service helpfulness; and service usefulness. (Please see Appendix B for a discussion of the methodology related to these scales.) We then compared the responses of interviewed youth to the responses of individuals between the ages of 18 and 24 who completed Wave 1 surveys, while staying in adult emergency, interim, or permanent supportive housing programs, as part of the overall Evaluation of Chicago's Plan to End Homelessness. There were 41 people between the ages of 18 and 24 who completed the adult surveys during Wave 1.

In comparing the experiences of youth in the youth system and youth in the adult system, youth in the youth system rated services and program staff in a more positive light in all three scales. Specifically:

- **Caring and Service Quality:** Youth receiving services in the youth system gave the programs and program staff a higher rating than youth-aged individuals in the adult system (Adult System Mean = 34.88, Youth System Mean = 40.50<sup>18</sup>).
- **Service Helpfulness:** Youth receiving services in the youth system described their programs to be more helpful than the youth-aged individuals in the adult system (Adult Mean = 15.88, Youth Mean = 17.59<sup>19</sup>).
- **Usefulness:** Youth receiving services in the youth system reported that their programs more often found them openings and services in other programs than did youth-aged individuals in the adult system (Adult Mean = 11.31, Youth Mean = 13.65<sup>20</sup>).

Youth's relatively positive assessment of services and staff interactions in the youth programs was supported by our qualitative findings. In both focus groups and interviews, we heard negative comments about emergency shelters, which primarily serve adults. Among the comments were: "I didn't know the people there, and I didn't trust them. I felt like I would be better with my family. I would be safer than being around people that I didn't know." Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative results suggest that youth programs are responding successfully to homeless youth's circumstances and needs and are correctly viewing them as adolescents in need of developmentally-appropriate supports rather than as "mini" homeless adults.

### **Programs Provide a Sense of Community**

While discussing their experiences in their current youth housing programs, a theme that emerged was the sense of community that participants felt with staff members and with other residents. Participants strongly valued this sense of community and talked about how their programs provided a sense of family. One participant summarized, "You don't have to worry

<sup>18</sup> The difference between the means was statistically significant at \*  $p \leq .05$ .

<sup>19</sup> The difference between the means was statistically significant at \*  $p \leq .05$ .

<sup>20</sup> The difference between the means was statistically significant at \*  $p \leq .05$ .

about where you gonna lay your head at night, you know you always got somewhere to stay... You know, you not on the street anymore. And then I feel like everybody cares for each other as a family. It's all like one big family." This participant reflected a key insight shared by most participants: the youth housing programs in our study provided much more than simply shelter or even a safe, stable place to stay. Overall, these programs provided youth with a sense of belonging and support, which were critical especially given the developmental stage of life these young people were in.

### Relationships with Staff Members

Participants at nine of the 10 programs specifically mentioned the sense of family or community that their programs provided<sup>21</sup>. When doing so, they frequently talked about positive relationships with staff members, especially case managers. In fact, of the 30 participants who answered the question about what had been their best day in the program, eight described it as a day when they felt particularly welcomed or cared for by staff. According to one participant, "My best day, I think it was really the first day. Yeah, so, the first day I got in there, I think the whole staff was really warm and inviting, and I can honestly say they are way more inviting than my family was. I think [the program] is like a second family that I have. They are my second family." This young man's reflection made clear not only that staff members were central to youth's overall experience of a program, but also that staff members had an impact on participants from the moment they first entered the program.

A theme that emerged from the interviews was the important role that staff members served as stable, supportive figures to youth, oftentimes in contrast to young people's chaotic home lives. This manifested in a number of specific ways<sup>22</sup>.

### Emotional support

While participants acknowledged the multiple types of material assistance they received from their programs, they also highlighted the less tangible but equally important emotional support they received from staff members. As one participant explained:

*My best day in the program...let's see, every day is my best day in the program. I go down to the office, and the whole team there, they are just so available, like always, no matter what they are doing, they are always available, they will stop doing what they are doing. If you have a problem or if you need something, like, it's really like a family when you go down there, and it's funny because a lot of us that come into the program, we don't really have, of course we have a family, like a biological family, but lot of us don't have a family, like, with affection, people that love you even though they don't have to. So that's really the biggest thing that they give to us. Yeah, they give us an apartment and all that, they give us someone to talk to and, you know, just to be there, like, I can, that's the greatest thing they give you is the family.*

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<sup>21</sup> We only interviewed one person at the program where this sense of family was not mentioned. Thus, it is possible that if we had interviewed more participants from this program, this theme also would have emerged.

<sup>22</sup> Although focus group participants were more reserved in describing their relationships with staff members, they corroborated what interview participants shared.

### Offer guidance

Participants also valued the mentorship and guidance that staff members provide and likened this aspect of their relationships with staff to the support other youth likely receive at home. For instance, after affirming that his case manager was respectful and honest, one participant continued, “They keep it 100 [percent]. If they think you are messing up, they’re gonna tell you. It’s like having...my case manager was like my oldest sister. The one that went away for college and she was, like, going to Harvard or something. Then she comes back home and tell you what you are doing wrong.”

### Encouragement

Participants also commented on how staff members believed in their abilities and encouraged them to succeed. For some youth, this encouragement provided much-needed motivation, particularly during challenging times when they felt hopeless and were tempted to give up on their goals. While discussing services that he received from his current program, one participant shared:

*No, like, this the first and last service I use out of my whole life like shelter wise or transitional wise. This the only person that really helped me out, and, like, I’m sticking through it, because they help me out a lot, like, seriously. Like, everybody look and feel like they might go through their ups and downs, the clients that live in here, but they look at them like as family. Because there is always a shoulder to lean on and help when you down...they always have a shoulder to lean on no matter what, no matter what the problem, what the situation might be. They keep you up. If you feel like you trying to do something but you ain’t succeed at it, they still gonna push you to keep on moving forward, like, ain’t got nothing to keep them down. That’s one thing, they help you out a lot. A whole lot. Like, you look at them as your family.*

### Ensure participants’ needs are met

Some participants also referenced the stability they felt in their programs because staff members consistently provided basic, material assistance, as well as daily supervision and oversight. This type of assistance, which could be easy to overlook and downplay as trivial, was particularly important with regard to young people’s developmental stage in their life course. It is part of the support that many youth likely take for granted, precisely because it seems so routine and thus unimpressive. For homeless youth, however, this support was noteworthy. While reflecting on his relationship with staff members, one participant said:

*Yeah, but, uh, like, you know, anything, if I wanted, like, if I need some more body wash, or say, like, I have a job interview, I need a suit. I don’t have a suit. They’ll help me get one or something. If there’s anything that I needed, I would have to go to [program staff] ...And they keep me, they also keep me in check, you know, make sure I do what I need to do. Make sure I’m on my chores each week, make sure I complete my homework, you know, stuff like that. Kinda like a parent. [Laughs] That’s how they treat me. But yeah, they’re really nice and, you know, they’re real cool.*

### Help manage conflict between residents

Participants also noted the assistance staff members provided in mediating disagreements among residents, which contributed to a more positive overall environment in the programs. For instance, one young woman described how her case manager was particularly respectful when she was having problems with a roommate. Her case manager offered to mediate the situation only if she wanted her to do so. The case manager gave her options and allowed her to determine when the case manager would intervene.

### Relationships with Residents

Interview and focus group participants also described how their programs provided a sense of community by fostering friendships among residents. For instance, they noted that group meetings and special events, such as bar-be-cues and parties, brought residents together. In fact, 10 of the 30 participants (33.3%) who discussed their best day in the program described it as some type of organized event or party or as a time when they felt like everyone was getting along. One participant identified the day before the interview, when her program held a health class focused on sex education, as her best day in the program. She explained, "Everybody was getting along. Everybody's laughing, everybody's just...it was so fun. It was like a little family thing. It was very fun." Another participant at that program reflected on a block party that her program held a couple of months prior to the interview. She recalled, "We were just all having fun outside. No arguing, no fighting. Just having fun. No drama. Just a fun day. Brought the kids out."

### Challenges to Community

Interview and focus group participants also identified a number of factors that challenged the sense of community and family they felt with staff members and with other residents.

### Challenges with staff

Interview and focus group participants shared some instances of strained relationships with staff members. Overall, these examples were far less frequent than participants' discussions about staff members seeming like family. They also mirrored common experiences of stress and conflict that impact any family-like relationship.

Feeling distant from staff. Youth noted feeling distant from staff members when they felt staff members were being judgmental and when they suspected that staff were participating in or believing house gossip. One participant explained that she did not trust some of the non-case management staff in her program because they shared information they learned from personal conversations with participants' case managers. She said:

*But you also need to watch what you say to them because they are pretty sneaky, and they pretend that they're your friend, and you might tell them about a problem you are having with a friend or your boyfriend or girlfriend, and then all of a sudden you go to your case manager for something, and then she will be like, 'Well, did you go to this meeting?' And then if you tell her, 'Oh sure,' [she will respond with] 'Are you sure you didn't go see your girlfriend because she yelled at you, and blah, blah, blah?' It's like, 'How did you know that? You must have [talked to the other staff members].'*

Frustration with rules. Youth also discussed how their own frustration with rules, especially curfew, and with staff members' inconsistent enforcement of rules negatively impacted their views of and relationships with staff. In general, participants understood and respected the need for programs to have a curfew, but they shared many examples of struggling to return to the program before curfew, at times due to unreliable and inconsistent public transportation.

Negative consequences for not following rules. Participants talked about the consequences for not following program rules, noting that residents who accumulated too many rule infractions could be forced to leave the programs. In one instance, a participant said that as a consequence of violating a program rule, she had to leave for 24 hours. She recalled:

*They gave me a 24 hour. Knowing that I have no family, no one to go to at all, and that I have no LINK right now and that I have no money. So they put me on the streets for 24 hours with nothing...I ended up, oh God, I was a mess. I think it was just because I was pregnant, like, hormones, but I was a mess, I didn't know what to do<sup>23</sup>.*

She added that staff advised residents who received "a 24 hour" to go to a hospital emergency room or police station to secure an emergency overnight placement somewhere. She did not follow this advice, though, because of another resident's experience. She explained:

*I know one of the girls, I didn't want to go because one of the girls here, um, she got a 24 out, and she went to, they sent her, like, the shelter bus took her to, like, you know, like an adult shelter, overnight shelter. And she said it was, like, a bunch of drug addicts, and they stole her stuff, and, like, one of the ladies was trying to strip her down and see if she had anything on her. I don't know. I'm not from the city, so I don't know. I don't really know if I could handle all that.*

Negative experiences with staff, such as this extreme example, weakened participants' relationships with staff members and their willingness to trust them.

### Challenges with residents

Participants much more commonly talked about distant, tense relationships with other residents than with staff members<sup>24</sup>. In keeping with our assessment of programs providing a sense of family, participants' comments about conflicts between residents recalled common disagreements between siblings.

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<sup>23</sup> This participant eventually went to her boyfriend's parents' home and stayed there overnight.

<sup>24</sup> Focus group participants corroborated the concerns that interview participants shared about other residents, but there was less discussion about this issue in the focus groups than there was in the interviews. It is possible that focus group participants were reluctant to talk about their disagreements with residents in front of other residents.

Small “dramas.” Participants discussed how small but regular conflicts and confrontations between residents led to “drama.” One young woman described tension with a roommate because this roommate frequently left their apartment messy, and the participant was tired of cleaning up after her. She also had a conflict with another roommate because this roommate asked for money, and the participant did not feel comfortable giving money to a person she did not know well. A participant at a different program said that she felt like she had to watch what she said around other residents because “the smallest thing will set somebody off. Not intentionally, but you just have to watch what you say.”

Lack of trust. Some participants also described generally not trusting residents and therefore limiting contact with them, as well as trying to avoid conflicts. For instance, one participant described her worst day in the program:

*[I] had gotten into an argument with one of the residents about me being concerned about her. That is one thing you just cannot do is get attached to a person at this place. 'Cause they will turn on you fast. I was concerned about her because she had been missing for about a week. No one knew where she was at. So when she came back, she thought everything was okay, and it wasn't. My feelings were hurt because it's like she basically was saying forget me. Like my feelings don't matter, the fact that I was concerned about her and her baby and why they were missing. So we got into a big argument, and staff had to separate us and stuff like that.*

Since that argument, this participant described limiting how close she became to other residents in order to prevent a similar disagreement and to guard against possibly being hurt again.

Avoid attachment. A young woman at a different program similarly shared that she did not want to make friends with other residents in her program because she also was concerned about becoming too attached to people. She thus kept to herself and had not formed any friendships with other residents in the program.

## **Participants' Safety**

As part of understanding youth's experiences in Chicago's homeless youth system, we included interview questions about youth's sense of safety. Specifically, we asked participants whether they felt safe in their current programs and whether they felt safe in their current neighborhoods.

### Safety in Current Programs

Twenty-six youth participants responded to a question about whether they felt safe in their current programs. The vast majority of respondents (24 youth) stated that they felt safe in their programs, and focus group participants echoed this perspective. Two youth expressed feeling generally safe but with some reservations. Importantly, no youth expressed feeling unsafe in their programs.

### Factors contributing to safety in programs

Interview and focus group participants noted features that made them feel safe, including: locked doors or gates at their programs; having to be “buzzed in” to enter program buildings; alarm systems; a security guard; having their own rooms; and programs’ screening of applicants.

Regarding the last procedure, some participants expressed their appreciation that programs had an intake process and did not let just anyone move in. According to one participant, “It’s a safe environment, you know, to live in. Because I think it’s really open and friendly and, you know, everybody’s there for you. And the participants they choose are generally the best people to be around. Like I’m honestly friends with everybody there.”

Additionally, *not* being at an emergency shelter was mentioned by focus group participants who were residing at a program for teen mothers. In discussing a different program that had a negative reputation, one participant said:

*It’s a shelter...you can stay there with everybody, and I don’t feel that [it is] safe, you know, you can’t have a place with men with young kids. I’m not saying every man is a child molester, but, you know, it’s just not safe, and then not even that ’cause some women be touching kids, too. It’s not safe to have people that are, like, not parents and stuff like that around kids. It should be like this shelter here [referring to her current program], turn to a specifically group of people, you know.*

Another participant in the focus group agreed, responding, “All shelters should be like where you get your own room. I don’t like the open shelters ’cause everyone is sleeping in the same room, and you don’t [know] these people from nowhere.”

### Limitations on participants’ safety

Two participants indicated that they felt safe in their current programs but with some reservations. One young woman, who had obtained an order of protection against her abusive father, explained:

*I feel safe until the phone starts ringing because then I’m scared it’s him, and I don’t want to deal with him. And, like, I don’t know, he knows the pay phone’s number, that’s the worst. So if somebody calls the pay phone, which is just our phone, but it’s just a pay phone hanging on the wall, if somebody calls and they ask for me, people don’t understand. Well, at first they knew, but now we are getting new residents, so they just might hand the phone to me, and then if I answer, he knows I’m staying here, and then the phone calls start again. So that’s the one thing I’m scared of, is, like, when the phone starts ringing, like, hopefully it’s not him.*

In this case, the participant’s concerns about her safety came from an external threat and were not associated with anything in her program.



The second participant who expressed reservations about his own safety did note concerns that were internal to his program. He stressed that the program was “my comfort zone” since “ain’t nobody going to mess with me up in the building.” He then indicated, however, that from time to time, some residents posed threats to other residents. He specifically recalled an incident when “we did have a person snap inside the building. He was about to chop some stuff up,” or, in other words, “to try and cut people.” This participant again stressed that “other than that, it’s been a good couple of months.” Thus, he described feeling mostly safe in his program, and only rare events disrupted that feeling.

### Safety in Program Neighborhoods

Thirty participants responded to a question about whether they felt safe in their current neighborhoods<sup>25</sup>. The majority of youth who responded to this question (16 participants) reported feeling unsafe in program neighborhoods. Thus, an appreciable amount of youth felt unsafe in their current neighborhoods. It is noteworthy that five of the participants who said they felt safe in their program neighborhoods qualified their answers by expressing reservations about their safety. Only four participants indicated that they felt safe in their current neighborhoods without any qualifications. We discuss these findings in greater detail below.

### Lack of safety in program neighborhoods

The 16 participants who reported feeling unsafe in their current neighborhoods identified a variety of reasons why they felt unsafe. Some participants discussed specific examples of violence that threatened their neighborhoods.

*Shootings and gang activity.* Seven participants referenced shootings and gang activity in program neighborhoods as threats to their safety. One young woman, for instance, contrasted the security she felt within her program with the violence outside of the building. She explained, “The building itself, I feel safe, but they have a security guard 24/7, and, like, to get in, you have to push the buzzer. So, but, it’s in a really, really bad neighborhood. Like, I’ve heard gunshots so many times, and I kind of hate living there, but I don’t have a choice. I mean, it’s Chicago, it’s all bad, so [Laughs].” She added that traveling to her former job, which was located in another area of the city where she felt unsafe, had been particularly challenging: “And I got off at 7:30 at night. Then I have to get my son from daycare, and I wouldn’t get home ’til like 9. And I was really scared. I hated it.”

Another participant similarly contrasted the safety in the program with the lack of safety in the neighborhood, saying, “Yes, [I feel safe] here in the building. But when you [go] outside the gate, it’s a different story. It’s a lot of men that love to kill people, take you for an advantage, rob people.”

One young woman recounted an incident that occurred the day before the interview, which was representative of the continued trauma many participants alluded to when discussing unsafe neighborhoods. She shared:

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<sup>25</sup> For five of the 30 youth who answered the question about feeling safe in their program neighborhoods, their responses were unclear.

*Me and my friend, we was walking and stuff. We heard shots...It was like, "Pow! Pow!" And it was like, "Did you hear that?" And then we ran for the building, and we didn't come back outside 'cause we [were] actually really, really scared, and they was like, "They're shooting! They're shooting!" And there's kids outside, and I'm like, "Why are these kids outside? Whose kids are those?" I'm like, "Go in the house!" You know, "Take the kids in the house." You know, "Where do you live?" And we were running. We were like, "Oh my God, let's go in the house! Let's go in the house!" So this particular area is not the particular area I thought it was gonna be. And I'm lookin', like, there's, like, so much drugs that's, like, our community is so sad. And when I go to different communities, like when I go up north and other stuff I'm like, "Why is not our communities not like that?" It's like, "Why does it have to be like this?"*

Drug dealing and groups hanging on street corners. Four participants discussed the ways that pervasive drug dealing and people hanging out on street corners in program neighborhoods made them feel somewhat unsafe. For instance, in response to the interviewer's question about whether he felt safe in the neighborhood, one young man replied, "Sometimes, not really. I hate walking outside and seeing what you see outside every day. Same people on the corner. It gets irritating. It's nerve racking, but you can't do nothing about it, so you take it one day at [a] time and just deal with it." A young woman at this same program responded to the same question as follows:

*Umm, at first I was scared. Because, you know, it be so many people standing on the corner, you don't know if they're gonna grab you or snatch your purse or snatch your phone. Because, like, as soon as you get off the bus stop, it's, like, so many people right there. And then it's, like, police constantly ride up and down the street, but the police still don't get them off the corner and stuff. So, most of the time when I see, like, a big crowd at one corner, I, like, cross the street and go, I take the long way...And then, like, at night, I don't even be out...after 8 o'clock, I don't be outside. I don't even be outside inside the gate. It's scary.*

General unsafe feeling. Four participants indicated that they generally did not feel safe in their program neighborhoods but did not offer any specific details as to why. As one young woman responded when asked if she felt safe in the neighborhood, "No. I live over here, so no.... just outside, people are crazy." For her, the lack of safety she felt had been internalized to the point that she described it as unexceptional.

Do not feel safe anywhere. Two participants said that not only did they not feel safe in their program neighborhoods, they did not feel safe anywhere. According to one participant, "I don't feel really safe anywhere because I have to constantly look out for my well-being because I really don't trust people outside of certain areas." The young woman mentioned above who had obtained an order of protection against her father explained that she felt unsafe because "my dad always for some reason finds out where I'm staying at, no matter what...So, like, every time I go outside, I still look around and

sort of, like, and when somebody yells, I'm like, 'They did not just call my name.' Like, I'll be turning around and stuff." Neither participant mentioned anything specific to their neighborhoods as contributing to their feeling unsafe.

### Feel safe but with reservations

Five participants shared that they felt safe in their neighborhoods but with some reservations. They qualified their answers in a variety of ways.

Relative safety. One of these youth was a refugee from Somalia who had lost much of his family to violence in the civil war. He noted that there were gangs in his current program neighborhood, "but if you're cool and you're going to your way, nobody's going to, like, disturb you. Thanks to God. 'Cause where I come from, you cannot walk like that. You might get shot." This participant identified threats in his community, but, to him, these threats were minor compared to the violence he already had survived.

Warnings about "bad neighborhoods." Two participants shared that while they generally felt safe in their program neighborhoods, people had warned them that they were living in "bad neighborhoods." One young man said that while he had heard there was a lot of violence in Chicago, specifically shootings, he had not experienced anything in his neighborhood. Yet, the way he talked about the neighborhood revealed his unease:

*I can't say I'm not safe, I mean, I'll walk to the store or something. But I never walked very far. The farthest I've ever walked from this building was probably the [another social service agency]. And coming home from school a couple times. Sometimes at night, the bus doesn't run around 11 o'clock. So I gotta take that long walk from [a major street]. So.*

Another participant disclosed receiving a similar warning and speculated that since she moved into the program in the winter, she might not yet have witnessed the violence that is more common during summer months.

Strategies to avoid violence. Two additional participants said they felt safe in their neighborhoods but shared strategies they used to try to avoid potential violence and unsafe situations. One commented on people that hung out and sold drugs in her neighborhood. She explained that while she wished they were not there, they did not bother her, in part because of the way she carried herself: "I think it's the way you put yourself. You can be all sass, smiling in their face, 'cause I don't do that. And when I walk past them, I try to look as mean as I can so they won't bother me and they won't mess by saying anything to me." Similarly, a second participant in the same program shared that she carried her keys like a knife when walking through her neighborhood. She added, "I just come and go. I don't be out there. I don't interact. I don't, none of that. So that's less chances for me, you know, being unsafe."

### Feel safe with no reservations

Only four participants indicated feeling safe in their current neighborhoods without qualifying their answers in some way. This very low number further underscored that feeling unsafe in

program neighborhoods was pervasive among participants and that lack of safety was a significant problem with which homeless youth programs contended.

## **Services and Reflections**

As part of each interview, we asked youth to describe the services they received from their current programs, as well as their reflections on these services. Overall, participants were appreciative of program services and, for the most part, spoke about them in a matter-of-fact way. That is, youth listed off the variety of services they received and frequently said they felt as if programs were doing enough with regard to each service. With some exceptions, youth typically offered descriptions of program services without enthusiastically praising or strongly critiquing them. Appendix C provides a table that lists all of the services youth mentioned throughout the completed interviews. This table shows the breadth of services homeless youth programs in our sample offered at the time of our study. It also shows that services generally aligned with youth's primary goals, particularly those related to achieving independence, education, employment, and housing. Below, we report on the various services youth discussed. In instances when youth provided suggestions for ways to improve a specific service, we include those suggestions.

### Life Skills

In discussing program services, participants were especially engaged in services related to life skills. As Appendix C shows, participants identified a long list of topics covered in their life skills classes<sup>26</sup>.

Participants explained how through life skills services, staff members and outside guests taught practical skills, such as budgeting and money management, grocery shopping, housekeeping, and how to talk to a landlord. They also discussed more personal issues that adolescents typically encounter, such as sexual health, healthy relationships, and substance abuse issues. In addition to the topics listed in Appendix C, participants also mentioned a number of miscellaneous issues covered in life skills services, such as driving, sewing, preparing one's taxes, understanding contracts (such as leases), and personal morals and values.

### Comprehensive life skills

Overall, youth spoke positively about the life skills services they received at their programs. The way they spoke about life skills also revealed that many participants conceptualized a wide range of assistance as life skills. The following comment was indicative of this trend:

*Life skills is the best because they give you like a lot of good resources, like drop-in centers, how to find an apartment, how does an apartment lease look...don't have a landlord trick you doing this or that. That would be one of them. So if you are looking for an apartment, you know what to look for in a lease. Keep a copy of the lease outside of the apartment just in case...And then if you are doing school, you should do like a lesson plan on like different scholarships....So she*

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<sup>26</sup> All of the programs in our study provided life skills services. Nine of the 10 programs offered life skills groups or classes. For the remaining program, where we only interviewed one participant, it was unclear if life skills were discussed one-on-one with staff members or in a group setting. Three programs stood out as having more formal life skills programming, where participants who were not in school or employed were required to attend structured classes several times per week.

*[the life skills coordinator] helps you [with] like different scholarships, different things within the organization that will help you... We talk about jobs, like different job skills that you might need. That's the best one.*

One young man, who was living at a program that had a relatively formal, structured life skills program, also praised the comprehensive nature of these services. He described his program's life skills services as:

*Life preparation. Like, we sit, I mean, we talk from like an hour about situations and stuff. Health care, like exercise, food preparation, taking care of the body, job preparation, stuff like that. Like, maintaining life preparations and stuff like that. And we discuss and we also do two tests about situations or those that they decide. It's tiring at first because it's, like, so much. It's every week. But it really helps most people, like, to learn stuff that they haven't known about.*

*Life skills reflect participants' developmental stage.* The wide array of life skills classes that programs offered reflects the scope of services and support they strived to provide based on participants' needs and stage in the life course. Programs are teaching participants the skills that more-privileged youth typically gain in well-resourced schools and families that have the means to support youth through the challenges and developmental milestones of adolescence.

Many youth reflected on how they have become more independent while in their current programs, particularly through life skills services and staff members' guidance and support. A particularly telling trend we noticed is that when interviewers asked participants how their programs were helping them to prepare for when they would move out of the programs, participants usually did not first talk about case managers providing housing referrals or searching for apartments. Rather, youth typically responded by first commenting on how programs were helping them to prepare to live on their own. The following examples of participants' replies to this question illustrated how youth provided slight variations of the same response:

*It's made me more responsible 'cause before this, I heard the word 'rent,' I knew what rent meant but, you know, I mean, ah you get some money and you frivolously throw it, spend it here, spend it there. Living here it actually made me think, 'Well, I can't do this until I pay rent, not until I pay rent. At least get rent out the way, then you can do what you want to do.' So that actually made rent to me a commodity.*

*They help you get a job, save money, and then make sure you find somewhere once you moving to let you know you there for good and for right reasons. So that's how they help with that.*

*It gives a lot of information. They give you a lot of structure, too, 'cause they make you do a lot of stuff. Like you gotta do your chore. 'Cause a lot of people don't like to clean up after behind themselves... So it's like, it's*

*forcing you to do stuff, and its telling you, you gotta go to [the program's life skills classes] every week 'cause it's teaching you how to be on time for stuff. It's teaching you how not to curse all the time 'cause you can't use cursing in your everyday language when you at a job.*

*Umm most definitely it helps you with, like, even when you get kicked out or leave, either go to college or leave for [another housing program] and stuff, or you have your own place and stuff, it helps you with cleaning, helps you with taking care of personal business, job readiness, getting in school, helping you be able to look into stuff on your own. Be able to prepare you for life and be able to have you live on your own, most definitely.*

*I guess to be more independent. To not wanna come back through the same or go over the same thing or whatever... Whatever you want, you want to have for your life, you go out and work for it or go out, you know, go out and do something. Just don't sit around and think somebody's going to hand it to you, gonna give it to you. It doesn't work like that. But I can say I am more independent, a lot more independent.*

*I think they prepare you enough for, you know, to actually accept the housing opportunity and to just live on your own. Because once you leave here, you should be stable, you should have a certain amount of money in your bank account if you saving. And, you know, I just feel like once I do leave here, I am going to be ready to go out there on my own. Like, I think it's enough. Yeah.*

*They prepared me to be more stable...more hands on with things. Be more focused on things I [am] supposed to get done. They push me to go to school, 'cause when I was younger, I was really, really wild, you know, but as I got older, I started to focus on education 'cause education will really take you really far. I never thought I would be in an honors class, so I'm really proud of myself.*

#### Youth suggestions for possible improvements

In addition to the overall praise they offered about life skills services, participants also noted a few potential improvements. Some youth advised that programs should add even more topics, while other youth suggested ways to enhance current life skills classes. For instance, one participant expressed concern that his peers were not taking the program's life skills classes seriously enough. He offered the following possible solution:

*She [the life skills coordinator] gives us papers and we have to answer questions and then just answer them and turn them in. And I don't think that they [other program participants] really take a lot of this stuff seriously. I do think that there should be a lot more, yeah, there should probably be a lot more videos for that*

*class like a visual instead of just paper, 'cause I think that they could connect more with visually and hands on then with reading and circling. You know?*

### Education-related

Participants frequently discussed how staff members helped them to resume their schooling and provided critical support with enrollment assistance, financial assistance, advocacy, and encouragement to keep moving forward.

### Enrollment assistance

Staff members helped participants identify local schools where they could continue high school, take GED classes, or enroll in community college. As one participant summarized, programs oriented youth to their options:

*[Program staff member] helps us with our financial aid and stuff like that. And she let us know what school good, what school costs too much, what school, you know, that will work out best for us. And they give us, like, options. Like my friend, she just got her sanitation license...And they give us stuff to do, like, to earn [a] certificate or license or something, you know, that will pay us and stuff.*

Staff members also assisted youth with assembling all required documents for enrollment, such as ID and verification of homelessness, and completing applications. At times, staff members even met with school staff on participants' behalf.

### Financial assistance

Programs also provided a variety of financial assistance once youth connected with schools and solidified their educational goals. This type of assistance included: help with filling out FAFSA forms for college financial aid, covering participant's GED test fees, advocating for waivers of various application fees, providing participants with school supplies and uniforms, covering school fees, and connecting youth with educational scholarships. In fact, youth at two programs mentioned that their programs provided some participants with scholarships to offset schooling costs.

### School advocacy

Program staff also provided advocacy with schools, which was especially important since participants, for the most part, could not rely on their parents to interact with school staff in traditional ways. For instance, a few participants commented on how program staff communicated with their schools on their behalf and even attended parent meetings at school. In this way, programs took on responsibilities that traditionally would be filled by a parent and likely strengthened the sense of program staff feeling like family. Additionally, as noted above in the Educational Status section (see p. 25), at least two participants benefitted from program staff advocating with community colleges to waive participants' past debt so that they could resume their schooling.

### Encouragement

Participants also reflected on the important encouragement staff members provided to enroll in school and to stay motivated once they did. Referring to one staff member, a young man

commented, “He’ll be in here sometimes or whatever, I’ll be doing my homework. He basically, he just makes sure I get my homework done, you know. Basically makes sure I keep on top of my stuff.” A young man at a different program shared a similar experience when the interviewer asked if his program had supported him since he enrolled in school: “Yeah, they’ve helped me. Set me up with tutor sessions, helped me study, and read the mid-term papers, finals papers. Whatever I needed help with.” These reflections were yet further examples of how programs provided the type of supervision and oversight that parents typically would offer to children.

#### Youth suggestions for possible improvements

While youth provided positive assessments of their programs’ education-related services, they noted that much of this assistance was limited to finishing high school and obtaining a GED, and they offered critiques that typically centered on their college aspirations. A large number of youth envisioned college as part of the track of their lives and valued college as an important step toward independence. Yet, college remained out-of-reach for many participants who expressed their need for help with identifying, enrolling in, and paying for college. One young man highlighted this concern while reflecting on his goal to attend DePaul University:

*Actually I think they [his current program] could help with that a little bit more. But I don’t know how they could help if they did. I think it’s kind of hectic, that I do a lot of research, so I think they could do a little bit of research. That could be me being lazy, but I think if they did a little research as far as grants and opportunities [like scholarships] I could look into...So they help me figure what I need to do to get into DePaul. But as far as paying for DePaul, there’s not been much help with that.*

He pointed to a need for assistance in obtaining financial aid and in receiving the support and guidance typically provided by families to youth who are navigating the college application and entry process.

#### Employment-related

As Appendix C shows, participants identified a wide range of employment-related assistance available at their programs, with some types being more helpful than others.

#### Finding jobs

Participants most frequently mentioned that programs provided job listings, referrals, and leads. There was a telling distinction between how passive or active this service was. That is, many programs had a “job board,” where they posted job openings that participants then could pursue on their own. Other programs, however, had developed relationships with employers and thus could offer personal connections to these employers when they had job openings. This more hands-on approach to job leads proved fruitful for some participants: “They [program staff] had a lot of connections on a lot of jobs. A lot of job placement...And they actually gave me a lead, ya know. We [program participants] had opportunities that other people didn’t, to get a job before other people did, because they knew [the program].”



### Skills-based services

Participants commented on helpful services designed to improve their employment skills, such as mock interviews, help with writing resumes, help with completing job applications, and computer classes.

### Employment pre-requisites

Some youth discussed how their programs helped them to fulfill certain pre-requisites so that they eventually will be able to work. One young man shared that his program helped him to apply for a work permit and was confident he will find employment once the permit comes through. A couple of youth at two different programs noted that their programs were covering the cost of classes to earn required certification to become security guards.

### Job training programs

One of the most valued employment-related services that participants discussed were structured, graduated, comprehensive job training programs that linked to paid internships and employment opportunities (see “Model Job Training Program” box). One participant strongly praised a job training program he began participating in before moving into his current housing program. This program offered six months of paid intensive training on computer information systems and general professionalism, followed by a six-month paid internship with a corporate partner. Ideally, the corporate partner will hire this participant at the end of his internship, but he explained that if this does not happen, the job training program will place him in a job with another corporate partner.

### **Model Job Training Program**

One program was unique in that it offers a comprehensive job training program on-site. According to participants' discussion of employment-related services, no other program in our study offers anything comparable.

This program's job training program is comprised of four phases:

- 1) life skills
- 2) job skills
- 3) paid internship
- 4) job search

All residents must attend the life skills classes if they are not already working or in school. Residents then go through a competitive application process to be selected by program staff for the job skills phase of the program. Only residents who complete the life skills phase are eligible to apply for the job skills phase.

At the end of the job skills phase, participants search for internships that ideally align with their career goals. One participant shared that her internship was with another social service agency, as she wants to become a social worker.

If the internship site is hiring, some participants may be hired on at the end of their internship. If not, then the program assists participants with a job search.

This program helped this participant develop a marketable skill in a field (information technology) that he found personally fulfilling and financially rewarding.

In highlighting what they perceived as particularly effective job training programs, participants indicated their interest in careers. Rather than accept any available job, youth desired employment that would be the first step on a long career ladder that leads to self-sufficiency. As such, they valued employment services that connected them with this type of work.

Youth suggestions for possible improvements

Youth's critiques of employment services focused on their need for job training services that culminated in job placements and for paid internship opportunities. Four of the five participants who offered specific critiques cited their need to be connected to actual jobs that pay well. One participant commented that all job leads provided by her program were dead ends, since they did not lead to employment. She pursued the leads her program provided, but "people act like they don't want to hire people." She stressed her desire for an opportunity to work and earn money. Another participant similarly described her program's employment assistance as too passive. She elaborated:

*The only thing is they'll give us directions to go to like places that are drop-ins during the day where they'll help you sort of find a job. Where there will be like a job center, and they have computers, they'll have like people there to help you with your resume. But they [staff at her current program] don't talk to them [staff at the job centers]. They just learn about it or somebody tells them about it, and they'll print out directions, and if you have nothing to do that day, they'll send you there for the day. So they do things like that. But they don't really do any other programs.*

Like the job leads that were dead ends, these seemingly uninformed referrals to employment services failed to connect youth with concrete assistance. A third participant noted that announcements about places that are hiring were insufficient, particularly when these places were employers like McDonald's and Starbucks. He explained:

*I think they [his housing program] can do a little bit better with the jobs. I mean, they offer a lot but I'm in IT so it's like, 'Hey, there is an opening up at Starbucks,' and I'm like, 'What? I don't wanna work at Starbucks.' I mean, I'm like one of the youngest people working in Information Technology, but still. I think they could give access to programs like [my job training program], you know. We could go to internships that they could do straight out of high school, or even for people in college. So I think they could, like, up the standards on jobs. Instead of like, 'Ok, you can work at McDonald's or Starbucks or something.' I think they could do a little bit better with that.*

This young man exemplified participants' interest in careers that would allow them to perform skilled work and become financially independent, a goal that generally was out of reach when employed in low-wage service sector positions. Youth conceived of developing employment

skills and connecting to “good” jobs as means to overcome homelessness and attain independence.

### Housing-related

While youth generally indicated that housing services were lacking, they still identified a range of housing-related assistance that their programs provided.

### Savings

Overwhelmingly, youth shared that their future housing plans were to save as much money as possible and move into their own apartments. More than half of the programs in our study (six out of 10) helped youth with this plan by having a mandatory savings program.

Two of these programs did not specify a certain amount that youth must save, just that they had a savings account and included savings in their budgets. A participant at one of these programs commented that from the time residents moved in to the program, staff stressed the importance of savings. She added, “You have to have an increasing savings account, like this is mandatory. Uhhh, so that when you get out of the program you will have some type of foundation to move on to the next step in your life.” When reflecting on her goal of moving later in the interview, she shared, “Well as far [as] the moving, we really haven’t started on that. Mm as far, except for savings that is the biggest most...you will hear that [giggles] from the time you get into the program to the time you get out. Like it’s really for the transition, for when you move on after the program.” While in this program, residents lived in their own apartments and had the option to take over the apartment lease at the end of their time in the program if they were financially capable of doing so. Thus, the heavy emphasis on savings was an attempt to increase residents’ chances of taking over the leases.

Three additional programs required youth to put between 30% and 65% of their income into savings. While none of these programs made a matching contribution to participants’ savings, the plan was that youth would earn interest on their savings.

The final program operated as a subsidized housing program, with residents’ monthly rent amounts gradually increasing from month to month. Residents’ rent payments were deposited into a savings account. Residents received their rental contributions, plus interest, at the end of their two-year stay in the program.

### Housing referrals

At least half of the programs in our study (five out of 10) provided participants with some type of referrals to housing programs. Two programs provided a four-month stay to residents. Thus, these programs provided referrals to longer-term youth housing programs, such as some of the two-year programs included in our study. A third program provided an 18-month stay and was part of an agency that also ran a subsidized housing program for youth. This program referred residents who were in good standing to its agency’s subsidized housing program, as well as other programs. Participants at a fourth program in our study indicated that staff provided referrals to subsidized and low-income housing, sometimes leaving referrals in participants’ mailboxes. These participants described completing housing applications for Section 8 and various housing authorities and being placed on waiting lists. Similarly, participants at a fifth program discussed

referrals to low-income housing, in and out of state, as well as notification when Section 8 waiting lists opened. It was unclear how helpful these referrals ultimately would be, as applicants could spend years on waiting lists such as these.

### Aftercare

Participants at half of the programs in our study also shared that their programs offered some type of aftercare services. Youth described these services as including continued meetings with case managers, transportation assistance, apartment furnishings, and material assistance (such as diapers and baby supplies, as well as personal hygiene items). Through aftercare services, programs provided former residents with ongoing support to ease their transitions to fully independent living.

### Financial assistance

Participants at two programs indicated that their programs provided some type of financial assistance to help residents move into their own apartments. According to youth, one program paid for resident's first month's rent, and a second program paid for up to six months of rent in addition to the security deposit. This second program also assisted residents with purchasing household items and furniture.

### Program extensions

Participants at two programs mentioned that the programs would extend residents' stays if they reached the end of their stays and did not have anywhere to go. For example, according to one participant, the cut-off age at one program was 21, but residents who were in good standing could stay for an additional six months past their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday if needed. Another participant at this program shared that some youth would complete their 18-month stay at the program and then reapply after being out of the program for about three months. A participant at another program indicated that her stay would be up approximately three months after the interview date, and she did not yet have a housing plan. She explained, "But if I don't have housing, I guess they are going to let me stay a little bit longer till they find me somewhere to go."

These programs' flexibility to extend participants' stays, as needed, seemed to be an effort to provide at least a small safety net so that youth did not return to the streets or doubled up with family and friends upon "graduating" from the programs.

### Youth suggestions for possible improvements

Participants expressed appreciation for the help programs offered and seemed to have a sense that programs were doing the best they could while facing challenges beyond their control. Youth offered insights on possible improvements related to immediate as well as long-term housing services.

Immediate housing. Focus group participants in particular stressed the need for improved immediate and transitional housing programs. Specifically, they noted the need for more "programs," meaning housing that provides supportive services, rather than shelters. Participants also noted the need for more "trans-friendly" housing programs. As one participant, whose stay at her current program was ending shortly, explained:

*But the gender situation for me, yeah, I feel is an issue because I'm in between. Society has this male or female, and I fall right in between. I'm calling these shelters now consistently, "Are you trans-friendly? Do you accept trans into your program?" ...I haven't had any callbacks or any feedback, so it's very difficult as far as gender wise for me."*

Additional needs cited by youth included programs that offer longer stays and housing programs located throughout the city rather than concentrated in certain neighborhoods as is the case currently. Further, they pointed to the lack of housing programs for youth ages 21 to 24 and the importance of ensuring the financial security of already existing housing programs. Focus groups were conducted in the summer of 2009, when the Illinois legislature announced deep budget cuts to social services. Participants were aware of these cuts and articulated how they endangered the services on which they relied. In fact, youth at one agency had participated in rallies and lobbied state senators not to support the budget cuts.

Long-term housing. Given larger constraints, such as a lack of affordable housing in Chicago, participants indicated that services related to long-term housing plans were insufficient. For instance, when asked if her program had helped her to prepare for when she would move out, one participant replied:

*No they haven't...They'll help you try to get into a two-year program, or if you're going, like, there's a few people in here that are going to go to colleges, like they help you get started with the dorm situation. But you pretty much gotta do everything on your own, but then they sort of guide you. So, like, if you need a phone number or some information while you're in your case manager's office, they might print it out and let you go from there with that.*

In short, participants expressed a need for concrete housing assistance and connections to available, affordable housing options. This need was summarized by one young man, who revealed his uncertainty regarding how youth would be able to afford their own apartments after graduating from their current programs:

*I think the biggest part is, like, you know, they could offer options like...other places to live. Because I know some people don't make enough money to afford an apartment very long. So, um, I think the biggest thing they could offer [is] more places to move in...like they could offer low-cost options.*

### Case Management

One of the most important services youth discussed was case management. Overall, youth shared very positive assessments of their case managers, valuing the concrete assistance case managers provided, the relational aspects of case management, and case managers' emotional support (see "What Youth Perceive as Ideal Case Management Approaches and Services" box on next page).

### Concrete assistance

It became clear from youth's interviews that case managers were participants' primary link to services within and beyond the homeless youth programs. In most cases, participants described collaborative relationships in which case managers helped youth establish service plans based on the youth's goals and then helped them work toward accomplishing these goals by connecting them to the services discussed above. That is, case managers helped participants obtain their ID, enroll in school, pay for GED application fees, and apply for school-based financial aid. Case managers also provided participants with employment and housing referrals, as well as helped them to apply for public assistance. Case managers helped youth stay focused on their goals through regular meetings (typically weekly) in which they checked in about the progress of their service plans.

Advocacy. As part of progressing through their service plans and meeting basic needs, case managers frequently advocated with outside agencies on participants' behalf to connect participants to external services and resources. One youth, in particular, stressed the importance of this advocacy. She said:

*So that first meeting [with her case manager], I did everything I needed to do for the last few months that I wasn't able to do on my own. She's [her case manager] got a little more power to call and give that homeless power and stuff, and they'll just call her to confirm I'm staying at [current program] and things like that.*

As this young woman explained, her case manager used the organizational power associated with her status as a homeless services staff person to advocate in ways the participant could not do on her own.

Participants also provided examples of case managers informing them about and then connecting them to new resources, such as Action for Children (for assistance with

### **What Youth Perceive as Ideal Case Management Approaches and Services**

- Build positive, trusting relationships with youth
- Offer consistent emotional support
- Show interest in youth as a whole person
- Show concern for issues that are important to youth
- Make time for youth
- Follow through on service plan
- Offer helpful resources
  - Requires case managers be knowledgeable about available services and overall homeless youth service system
- Help youth navigate confusing systems
  - Help with paperwork
  - Advocate with other providers

paying for childcare); Social Security; and the Illinois Healthy Woman “pink card,” which covers family planning and reproductive health services. In short, case managers’ knowledge of the larger social service system, as well as their organizational power, benefitted participants. In some cases, when youth ran into dead ends at other agencies or institutions, their case managers were able to intervene to move things forward.

*Navigating difficult systems.* Participants provided specific examples of case manager’s advocacy with state public assistance offices, such as applying for the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP, a.k.a. food stamps) or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) for the first time by instructing youth how to apply and providing a proof of homelessness letter. Case managers also assisted a couple of participants with removing themselves from someone else’s public assistance case and starting their own. One young man even benefited from a case manager helping him to recertify for a higher amount of food stamps because he was not employed.

Advocacy with public assistance caseworkers was particularly helpful, as youth shared many more critical reflections about their experiences with state public assistance offices than positive reflections. At least 12 participants described their perceptions of the services at these offices as negative, and some noted condescending interactions with staff at these offices. One participant summarized her perceptions as follows:

*It’s always packed. Like, ugh, I hate going there. Everyone hates going there. My caseworker, though, he’s alright with getting the job done, but he’s very rude. I hate seeing him. He’s like one of those people, like, he looks down at people who are on Public Aid. ‘Cause I know a lot of people live off the government for their whole life, but not everyone’s like that.*

Participants also discussed running into bureaucratic hassles that delayed their receipt of various forms of public assistance. These delays were common when youth had to transfer their cases from one office to another or alter their cases in some way, for example due to a change in employment status.

### Emotional support

Beyond connecting youth to services and providing advocacy, participants revealed how much they valued the relational aspects of their interactions with case managers. With a few exceptions, participants shared how they built supportive relationships with their case managers over time, and their reflections were instructive in showing ways that staff members could build relationships with young people.

Participants felt they received emotional support when case managers took time to get to know participants; listened to their personal problems without judgment; provided help in managing stressful situations, such as conflicts with other residents; respected youth’s boundaries and did not press for information youth were not yet comfortable sharing; maintained the confidentiality

of information youth shared; were honest with youth; shared their own personal stories to relate to youth; respected youth's goals; helped youth stay focused on their goals; followed through on issues discussed in meetings; were available to meet; offered helpful referrals; and held youth accountable by reviewing their progress.

These approaches helped participants feel that they could trust their case managers and come to them with personal and service-related issues. One young woman's explanation of what she liked about her case manager exemplified this outcome:

*That you can talk to her about anything and then she just won't, like, look at you any kind of way. Or she won't, like, downsize you. Because, like, sometimes you can talk to people and they just look at you like, you know, I don't know. But she doesn't do that. She's real, and you can talk to her about anything. Like it could be, like, the worst thing. Like you feel like you can't tell nobody else. But you can tell her. And then she won't tell nobody else.*

Strong relationships with case managers and consistent emotional support contributed to youth's stability in their programs and were additional ways that programs cultivated a sense of family and community. These supportive, stable relationships also contrasted, in many cases, to youth's past experiences with adults.

#### Service Coordination

In addition to the direct advocacy case managers provided on behalf of individual participants, youth described how programs coordinated with other agencies and institutions in order to increase the services available to all participants and thereby meet participants' needs.

#### Counseling

According to participants, most programs (seven out of 10) partnered with agencies that provided counseling services, either by providing referrals to these counseling centers or bringing counseling staff in to offer services on-site. In fact, one program had a therapist on-site and required participants to have a minimum of six meetings with the therapist after they first moved in to the program. Four programs partnered with the Counseling Center of Lakeview to connect youth with counseling services<sup>27</sup>.

One participant noted that her program was proactive in connecting her to counseling services. Her case manager completed a post-partum depression screening with her and, based on the results, found a counselor who would meet with her on-site. The participant identified this interaction with her case manager as the time when she felt the most trust in her case manager, which was a clear indication of how much she appreciated her case manager's concern for her well-being and ability to connect her to additional supports.

#### Employment

Youth also explained how their programs partnered with other agencies to connect them to job training and employment opportunities. Thus, even if programs did not have comprehensive

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<sup>27</sup> The Counseling Center of Lakeview closed on April 30, 2012. This closure likely will negatively impact homeless youth's access to counseling services and place additional strain on homeless youth programs' resources.



employment-related services on-site, they linked youth to organizations that were better equipped to assist in this area. For example, one participant shared that his program connected him with Youth Ready Chicago, which provided summer jobs to youth. He added that one day that stands out as a particularly good day since he entered the program was the day Youth Ready Chicago connected him with a job. He explained, “It was like hopefully a sign that things’d get better on the jobs searchin’ and whatever.”

A participant at another program highly valued the connection her case manager provided to a comprehensive job training program. At the time of the interview, this participant was about to begin her community service hours and then would be placed in a paid internship by the job training program. In responding to the interviewer’s question about her best day in the program, she said:

*It’s when my case worker took me to [the program] for my job training. And I completed the job training. I would have never found out about it if it wasn’t for my caseworker. She actually drove me out there for the orientation and took me to some of the classes. And I graduated from the job training, now I’m fitting to start my community service and pay income. So that’s helping me find a job.*

Similar to the young man who participated in Youth Ready Chicago, this young woman not only valued her employment opportunities but also recognized the vital role her case manager played in making these opportunities possible. Like the young man, part of this young woman’s positive outlook for the future was rooted in the service coordination her case manager had facilitated.

Yet another participant reflected on her case manager’s role in making her employment goals more realistic. This participant came into her program with the short-term goal of becoming a CNA. She already had been studying nursing but wanted to earn her CNA license in the meantime. Her case manager provided her with information on the WIA program, which could help pay for her CNA class.

### General networking

Participants at a variety of programs in our study discussed the general importance of the networking their programs do with other organizations. This networking provided assistance with obtaining things like orders of protection, clothing vouchers, and free YMCA memberships and provided opportunities to participate in fieldtrips and recreational events with other youth organizations. At times, just being part of a homeless youth program that had a good reputation in the social service sector opened doors for participants. According to one:

*And then actually this program networks with a lot of other places like, um, you know, they recognize “Ok. You have been in [agency name].” They note, they recognize that you have dealt with certain type of things and that you’re, I dunno, you could be, they know the procedures in here, the discipline procedures, so I guess that outside of here you would be recognized a little bit more. They just work, they just network with a lot of people.*

### Youth-initiated coordination

Youth often played an active and sometimes independent role in developing coordination with other programs and assembled a patchwork of services to maximize available assistance. Nearly half of the participants (15) referenced receiving services from at least one additional program currently or in the past, and at least five of these participants mentioned more than one outside program. The services participants accessed outside of their current programs included: employment assistance, such as outside job training programs; childcare; parenting assistance, such as teen parenting programs and parenting classes; and public assistance, such as SNAP, TANF, and WIC.

At least five participants discussed receiving case management-type services from outside programs, independent of their residence at the youth housing programs. One participant, for example, explained how she continued to work with a case manager at a youth housing program where she previously stayed through their aftercare program. She said:

*Anything I feel like I need that I can't get here, I can just go down there and get it. Just like that. And I have weekly meetings with them, too, that I have to attend just to check up, make sure everything is going good over here, and if I need anything that they not providing me with, they will provide me with it, so... They basically got, they work, we all working on the same thing, my goals, right now. Like, if I need help with getting in school, my case manager here is helping me with that, but if I feel like there's something she can't help me with then I go to over there and then they help me with it. If I need transportation to get to school, then they help me with it if they can't help me with it, you know.*

This young woman explained how she, rather than her case manager, had assembled a network of services.

Similarly, a young woman staying at a different program discussed her dissatisfaction with the case management services she received there. She had learned to rely on a helpful social worker at her OBGYN's office for many typical case management tasks. She explained:

*I'm happy my doctor is an adolescent pregnancy OBGYN. And you get a social worker while you're there. So everything I have a problem with, I just go to my social worker there, and she'll do it. Like she did my insurance card for me. She helped me figure out how I was going to do court. And then, like, they'll help you with classes, like pregnancy classes, so I don't really ask my case manager anything about it, because she didn't help me when I needed it. So now I have a social worker that will do everything for me.*

### Material Support

Beyond services related to their three main goals of education, employment, and housing, as well as case management and service coordination, participants identified several additional services which they appreciated. Many youth noted the material assistance their programs provided, such as shelter, food, clothes, and hygiene products. Participants who were living in their own apartments as part of their programs also commented on receiving assistance with purchasing

groceries, such as food vouchers and grocery store gift cards, as well as food pantry referrals. Participants also shared examples of staff members providing them with small amounts of cash, at times out of their own pockets, to cover the cost of some of the above items. This practice highlighted the conundrum staff members face when working with too few resources to meet participants' needs. Additional financial assistance included the opportunity to earn cash in exchange for completing extra chores in the program.

#### Supplementing youth's limited access to assistance

Programs' provision of material assistance was of critical importance for youth since their access to such assistance was quite limited. For instance, participants revealed ways that the public assistance system (officially, the Illinois Department of Human Services Division of Human Capital Development) is lacking. Individuals without children typically qualified only for the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP, a.k.a. food stamps). Participants who were parenting were eligible to receive TANF, but the cash assistance this program provided was insufficient to cover one's own rent. As one TANF recipient commented, "They [the state public assistance office] do enough for her [referring to her daughter]. I don't think it's really designed to take [care] of me, too. It's enough money to buy her stuff but not enough money to buy me stuff... It's made for people to take care of their kids, so that's fine." Another TANF recipient commented that she still relied on her current housing program for bus cards, even though she was supposed to cover her own transportation costs since she received TANF. This participant explained that her TANF money did not cover everything, though.

Some youth were ineligible even for SNAP, such as one participant who explained that he was not eligible for any public assistance because of his immigration status: "I didn't even get, like, you know, like, food stamps like other people are getting. And I can understand that it's because [of] my status I'm not the same as other persons here. But that's kind of, it's like, it's something like, I need to get it, but I understand it's because of my status I'm not getting it." Another participant shared that his food stamps were cut as soon as he found a job because he began making too much money to qualify for this assistance. Yet, this young man continued to live in a homeless youth program and expressed concern about his ability to afford his own apartment.

#### Healthcare

Participants at half of the programs in our study indicated that their programs provided on-site healthcare services. In these cases, a nurse or doctor visited the program on a regular basis to provide basic medical services. Participants at four additional programs indicated that their programs provided healthcare referrals such as to free clinics and to Stroger Hospital's dental clinic<sup>28</sup>.

#### Youth suggestions for possible improvements

As with housing services, participants seemed to understand that programs were doing the best they could to connect them to healthcare services but faced limitations in doing so since so many participants did not have health insurance. A number of youth identified lack of health insurance as a source of concern. This issue particularly affected youth 18 and older who did not have children in their care, as they did not qualify for Medicaid. As one young man explained:

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<sup>28</sup> The participant in the 10<sup>th</sup> program did not discuss healthcare.

*So, being that I'm 19, I don't have a medical card anymore, so you know, they'll connect me with different resources like, you know, HHO [Heartland Health Outreach, a health clinic for uninsured individuals] ...and I go through HHO and they'll connect me to...Rush, Cook County Hospital where I can get like the cheapest deals, or depending on what it is, I'll go, there's this eye doctor place [IIT] ...They'll connect me to IIT for, you know, dental and eye appointments and everything like that.*

Although this participant described a complicated, multi-layered process to obtain needed healthcare, he did not identify any improvements his current program could make. Rather, “I think the next step would be the government, like, come on, really? Zero to 18? It should be like [ages] zero to 25 [for whom the government provides health coverage]. It really should. But I think they [his current program] do the best they can with healthcare.”

With regard to specific possible program improvements, other participants expressed a need for more on-site clinics at homeless youth programs, vision services, and help with paying their medical bills.

#### Childcare

Participants in only two programs discussed receiving childcare assistance. Not surprisingly, these two programs were specialized programs that provided services to pregnant and parenting teens. They described a combination of on-site services and referrals to affordable daycare options.

#### Youth suggestions for possible improvements

Participants who were parents expressed a need for more help connecting to off-site childcare services. They described delays in securing childcare, while they awaited approval through state public assistance offices and Illinois Action for Children (IAFC). In one case, a young mother had to take her son out of his current daycare program and find someone else to care for him because of the delay she faced in being approved by IAFC. Participants who were parents also expressed a desire for more on-site childcare services, as an on-site childcare center would be convenient in terms of locating a provider and transporting their children to daycare on their way to school and work.

#### Help Obtaining ID

For youth who did not have identification documents, such as a Social Security card, birth certificate, and state ID, programs helped them obtain these documents. Staff helped participants navigate application procedures and determine what they needed in order to be able to apply for each piece of identification. Programs also, at times, covered the cost of obtaining these documents.

#### Transportation

Across the board, transportation assistance was a primary need that youth identified. All 10 programs in our study provided CTA passes to participants, which youth greatly valued. Participants at three programs mentioned that staff members also would provide them with rides

to places like job interviews and various appointments. Only one participant reported that his program sometimes provided cab fare.

#### Youth suggestions for possible improvements

Participants overwhelmingly expressed a need for more transportation-related services. They stressed that transportation assistance was inconsistent, since programs frequently ran out of CTA cards. This inconsistency made it difficult for youth to make it to scheduled appointments and look for jobs. Youth stressed the need for consistent transportation assistance. At a minimum, youth indicated that programs needed a more consistent supply of CTA cards. Additionally, youth expressed their desire for programs to provide rides. Due to living in areas that lacked reliable public transportation services, youth described struggling, at times, to return to programs before curfew. They noted how long it could take to travel throughout the city on public transportation and how frustrating it was to deal with inconsistent schedules and frequent delays. One participant even framed reliable transportation as a safety issue. He explained:

*I think that there should be like, uh, some way that, um, you know, that there could be some type of service, some type of program where they could come [and pick participants up], like, 'cause a lot of the kids get stranded sometimes out of here. And, um, you know, there nobody to come get them...I don't think that there should just be a person that's just dedicated to driving people places, but I do believe that there should be more access to transportation... 'Cause it's really dangerous outside. Just, you know, being outside of here, before I moved in here, it's dangerous for youth period to be outside, on the south side of Chicago, [in] these areas for too long by themselves. Especially, like, if you're living in here [his current program], you should be able to call somebody up and say "I'm stranded," or "I need to get home right now," or "I've been robbed or beat up on," or "I feel like I'm not safe right now. I need someone to come get me." That should be available.*

#### Recreation

Participants noted recreational activities that provided them with opportunities to have fun and build community with other residents. This type of programming could be easy to overlook because of the focus on helping youth develop concrete skills and become more independent. This programming was important to youth, though, as they expressed valuing opportunities to have fun. Some participants talked happily about field trips to places like Steppenwolf Theatre and events like the Chicago Auto Show, as well as in-house activities like board games and movie nights.

### **PART III. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Overall, our research yielded a number of instructive findings about homeless youth who have gained entry to homeless youth programs and about Chicago's homeless youth system—in terms of the homeless youth themselves, their needs, and their experiences with the programs that serve them. Additionally, we identified a number of areas for further modification and improvement.

## **Housing**

A clear goal of all study participants was to acquire stable housing. Given the lack of affordable housing in Chicago, we anticipate that the youth in our study will struggle to find apartments they can afford to rent after leaving their current programs, despite having developed skills related to budgeting, interacting with landlords, and independent living, more generally.

- ▶ Develop supportive and subsidized housing for youth after they leave their current programs.

## **Continuing Education**

We have highlighted throughout this report that education was a primary goal for most participants. Most expressed strongly valuing education as a means to attaining independence and actively were engaging in school. The higher number of youth who enrolled in school after entering their programs vs. before entering their programs likely reflects the influence of programs' services, such as supportive, encouraging staff members and a stable residence. Despite this success, many of the youth in our study expressed a strong desire and commitment to attend college but received little support in navigating the application process and with financial assistance. Given the increasingly prohibitive cost of higher education, homeless youth likely will struggle to find ways to pay for college.

- ▶ Increase homeless youth's access to college education and advanced technical training.

## **Careers vs. Jobs**

Similar to education, we found that youth in our study deeply valued employment and strove to secure paid work that would help them to afford their own apartments and establish long-term financial independence. The type of low-wage jobs that most of the employed youth in our study held, however, will not enable them to achieve these goals. Participants shared their interests in job training programs that connect to actual jobs and to paid internships. Participants' focus on "good" employment was a major theme throughout our interviews. Youth seemed to be begging for a career path but were hitting a wall. This finding raised a key question about what career paths are available to youth, as well as the following recommendations:

- ▶ Shift the discourse around employment for homeless youth from "jobs" to "careers."
- ▶ Connect homeless youth to jobs that pay well and lead to careers.
- ▶ Make placement in college or some type of technical education program the end product of homeless youth programs.

## **Responsive Services and Programs**

Our research suggests that there are different paths youth are following into and out of the homeless youth system. Participants expressed entering the homeless youth system for different reasons and thus having different needs. Whereas some primarily needed a stable home, others shared a need and appreciation for personal "capital" development, such as life skills, education,

and job training. Some youth also expressed greater ease in adjusting to living in a communal setting and greater comfort forming relationships with peers in these programs.

- ▶ Offer a wide range of services and programs, specifically a continuum of housing options, that are responsive to homeless youth's diverse situations and needs.
- ▶ Investigate how to provide supportive non-residential services to homeless youth who are not connected to housing programs.

### **Supporting Families**

A number of participants indicated temporarily staying with supportive family members before moving into their current programs, as well as maintaining and improving relationships with supportive family members after moving into their current programs. This finding suggests that it may be beneficial for the homeless youth system to develop strategies to support and even strengthen these positive ties.

- ▶ Investigate how to assist supportive adults and caregivers in youth's lives with housing youth who are homeless or at-risk and assess whether such a process is feasible.
- ▶ Invest in providing ongoing supportive services to youth and families who reunite after youth leave housing programs.

### **Pregnancy and Parenting among Homeless Youth**

Our research shows that young mothers are a unique group within the population of homeless youth that are facing unique challenges. The young mothers and pregnant young women in our study commonly reflected on how their lives seemed to be on hold, as adjusting to their new(er) role as mothers typically delayed education, job training, and employment plans. Bureaucratic delays with organizations designed to assist with childcare posed further barriers to young mothers. Additionally, these participants indicated that becoming pregnant added strain on already tense relationships with family members, either because adults disapproved of their pregnancy or because financially-strapped families were unable to support a new child and young mother.

- ▶ Develop and maintain services and programs capable of responding to pregnant and parenting homeless youth's unique needs.

### **Outreach to Homeless Youth**

Youth's positive assessment of outreach services to homeless youth was one of our key findings. Participants discussed how they were able to build supportive relationships with outreach workers over time, as workers provided material assistance (i.e. food, clothes, and hygiene items); referrals to residential and non-residential services; and consistent emotional support.

Additionally, youth described having to wait anywhere from one day to two years to gain entry to their current programs. Given the length of some waiting lists and the uncertainty homeless youth face regarding when a spot might open, it is important to consider how to bring services to youth who have not gained entry to these programs. Street outreach services are an essential resource.

- ▶ Invest in and expand street outreach services to homeless youth.

### **Accessing the Homeless Youth System**

Participants discussed multiple points of access to their homeless youth programs, with the helpfulness of each point varying based on the access point and on individuals. Having multiple access points may be helpful, in the sense that it maximizes the likelihood that youth will learn about and thus be able to connect with homeless youth programs. On the other hand, having multiple access points may be chaotic, as what youth can expect varies from point to point.

- ▶ Assess whether there is a need to address access to the homeless youth system.

### **Trauma-informed and Asset-based Programming**

Throughout the interviews, youth presented as goal-oriented, proactive, and focused on developing their future plans. Despite identifying significant life challenges, for the most part, youth were extremely positive about their ability to overcome these challenges and the likelihood of successfully accomplishing their primary goals related to education, employment, and housing. During discussions with homeless youth providers, some suggested that youth's positive outlook reflected the trauma-informed and asset-based framework within which providers work, as providers focus on youth development and view young people as assets, not problems to be fixed. It is important to continue to recognize and build upon homeless youth's resilience.

- ▶ Ensure that programming for homeless youth remains trauma-informed and asset-based.

### **Aftercare**

Based on the range of issues with which homeless youth are dealing and the overall positive assessment they offered of their programs, it seems that youth would benefit from ongoing support from programs after they move out of these programs. Long-term case management and service planning could further assist youth with their transitions to independence.

- ▶ Investigate how to provide supportive non-residential services to homeless youth (i.e. "aftercare") after they graduate from housing programs.

### **Healthcare**

A large number of participants were uninsured and relied on on-site medical services their programs provided and referrals to free and low-cost clinics. Even so, participants commented on accumulating unpaid medical bills. While the healthcare services that programs provide are helpful, they are unable to address the underlying need for health insurance. Furthermore, healthcare and housing are intertwined, as stable housing helps to improve homeless youth's health, and reliable healthcare improves homeless youth's ability to participate in housing programs and services.

- ▶ Provide homeless youth with consistent access to affordable, comprehensive healthcare.



## **Mental Health and Counseling**

Overall, participants talked little about their own mental health needs or concerns. Some, however, noted the value of the counseling services their programs made available. Additionally, access to reliable counseling services likely is helpful for program staff who must be attentive to participants' mental health needs as they build relationships with them and able to connect participants to immediate resources when they are needed. The Counseling Center of Lake View (CCLV) was a common mental health provider with which homeless youth programs partnered. On April 30, 2012, after 40 years of service, CCLV closed. We cannot overstate what a tremendous loss this is to the homeless youth system. A top priority of the City of Chicago and funders should be addressing the significant service gap that is left as a result of CCLV's closure.

- ▶ Ensure homeless youth have access to consistent, affordable mental health and counseling services.

## **Transportation**

Transportation assistance was another critical resource participants identified. While youth appreciated the services their programs provided, such as CTA cards and, in a few instances, rides from staff member, participants overwhelmingly expressed a need for more transportation-related services. These services could be inconsistent, as youth reported that programs frequently run out of their limited supply of CTA cards.

- ▶ Develop strategies to ensure consistent access to transportation assistance for homeless youth.

## **Homeless Youth's Safety**

While participants generally described feeling safe in their current programs, they consistently described feeling unsafe in program neighborhoods and offered multiple concrete examples of ongoing threats to their safety, such as drug dealing, gang activity, and shootings. Despite programs' best efforts, safety is a significant concern for homeless youth.

- ▶ Provide residential and non-residential services in neighborhoods throughout Chicago where youth can feel safe.

## **Financial Support**

Similar to healthcare assistance, participants described limited financial assistance to which their programs helped them connect, such as public assistance and WIC. This assistance, however, largely is inadequate, as most youth did not qualify for any type of financial assistance. In fact, some employed youth did not even qualify for SNAP. This limited assistance fails to alleviate the financial burden homeless youth face and places financial strain on homeless youth programs that struggle to fill the gap, such as by providing transportation assistance.

- ▶ Connect homeless youth to financial assistance, such as cash public assistance and stipends for participation in homeless youth programs and education.

## PART IV. CONCLUSION

### **Agencies as Agents of Transformation**

Our research indicates that, overall, homeless youth programs are doing a good job of recognizing that homeless youth are experiencing a critical and unique stage in the life course. We have noted throughout this report that programs in our study are providing youth with much more than simply a place to stay. Beyond housing, programs provide developmental and practical skills for youth to establish the necessary personal capital to survive on their own. Like all adolescents, the youth in our study are in a transitional life stage, and thus the issues they face and the services they need differ a great deal from those of homeless adults. Like all adolescents, they need support in transitioning to adulthood, which requires developing key life and social skills.

Participants point to specific skills they had developed through their programs which increased their self-confidence about their personal abilities to live independently as adults. These responses revealed how agencies are serving as agents of transformation by aiding young people in their transitions to adulthood. Through life skills classes; one-on-one relationships between staff members and participants; and connecting participants to information and resources, programs are teaching participants what it means to be an adult. They are helping participants to develop a new perspective and to be prepared to live on their own.

Yet, our findings also point to how inequality structures homeless youth's life course. While current scholarship on youth focuses on the lengthening of adolescence and delayed adulthood as many college graduates return to their parents' home, homeless youth face a very different set of expectations. In contrast to more-privileged youth, homeless youth are expected to become independent, self-sufficient adults in their late teens and early 20s. They are not afforded the longer transition to adulthood that is becoming increasingly common in our society. These strict and unequal expectations place undue strains on homeless youth as well as homeless youth providers.

Based on conversations with providers, we advocate for funders, policymakers, and providers to adopt (and in many cases continue using) a "Transition Age Youth" framework<sup>29</sup> in providing services to homeless youth. This framework recognizes: (1) that all youth need support as they transition to adulthood and thereby destigmatizes homeless youth, (2) that different youth need different types of support and thus a "one-size-fits-all" approach to homeless youth services is inadequate, and (3) that homeless youth are unique from homeless adults and constitute a niche group within the larger homeless population that requires specialized services.

Our findings support the Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness Youth Constituency Group's (1/19/12) assertion that "Youth who are homeless are not mini adult homeless people nor do they experience homelessness in the same way as adults; therefore all proposed responses to the specific additional barriers and challenges that they face must be developed through a lens of developmentally appropriate and cultural competency." Thus, there is a need to recognize

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<sup>29</sup> The California Institute of Mental Health, for example, uses a "Transition-Age Youth" framework in its approach. See: <http://www.cimh.org/Services/Transition-Age-Youth.aspx>.

homeless youth as a niche group within the homeless population who are in a specific transitional phase in the life course and thus require developmentally appropriate services.

### **System-level and Societal-level Constraints**

Despite homeless youth programs' effectiveness as agencies of transformation, our research also highlights that these programs are constrained by the limited resources of the homeless system and are working to help participants overcome larger social problems, such as poverty. While the participants in this study were rather positive in their assessment of how programs were preparing them to live on their own and expressed confidence in their ability to meet their goals, particularly regarding housing, education, and employment, the social reality is such that youth likely will struggle to meet these goals, despite personal transformation and individual initiative.

The critiques that youth offered of programs' services typically reflected external, macro-level constraints that homeless youth programs face. For instance, programs can only do so much to assist with college, especially because its cost has become so prohibitive. Thus, despite programs' best efforts, homeless youth likely will struggle to find ways to pay for college. Similarly, a high youth unemployment rate and lack of available jobs hinder programs' ability to provide youth with adequate employment services.<sup>30</sup> The type of low-wage jobs that most of the employed youth in our study did find will not enable them to achieve their goals of paying for their own apartments and becoming financially independent. While housing programs seem effective at helping youth develop important personal skills and knowledge, they are unable to alter the overall state of housing, education, employment, healthcare, and the economy in Chicago.

### **Destigmatizing Homeless Youth**

Youth in our study noted various reasons for their homelessness, but it became clear that these reasons often were about instability, conflict, and poverty in their families of origin which resulted in youth either being kicked out of their homes or deciding to leave on their own accord.

Our findings refute stereotypical portrayals of homeless youth as "juvenile delinquents" whose out of control behavior caused their homelessness. While a small number of youth reflected on how their own behaviors, such as drug use or gang involvement, contributed to their homelessness, these instances were extremely rare. As discussed throughout this report, youth's homelessness much more commonly resulted from chaotic, disorganized family lives.

Additionally, it is important to note that the rare instances of youth's behaviors contributing to their homelessness reflect the general instability and conflict with which youth were living. These types of issues occur in most families, but families with greater economic resources are able to manage such conflicts. There was nothing inherently "delinquent" about many of the precipitating incidents these young people described. Rather, the young people's parents identified their behaviors as so problematic and unacceptable that they no longer were willing to provide them with shelter.

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<sup>30</sup> A recent Chicago Tribune article reported that the 16.3% unemployment rate for youth age 16 to 24 at the end of 2011 was almost double the overall unemployment rate. See [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-04-12/news/ct-edit-youth-20120412\\_1\\_unemployment-rate-jobless-rate-young-professionals](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-04-12/news/ct-edit-youth-20120412_1_unemployment-rate-jobless-rate-young-professionals).

In short, homelessness among the youth in our study was more of a “situation-driven” than a “behavior-driven” process and a result of poverty, and participants were resilient young adults whose homelessness often was a result of poverty.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There are a couple of noteworthy limitations in our study that point to future research needs. As noted at the beginning of this report, our study includes youth who were housed in the homeless youth system. Our study does not include youth who were living on the streets or who were doubled up with family members and friends at the time of their interviews. Additionally, our study does not include youth who were unable to find spaces in our study’s programs, for instance because there were no open slots at the time they sought shelter, or youth who were unable to navigate the at times complicated process of entering programs.

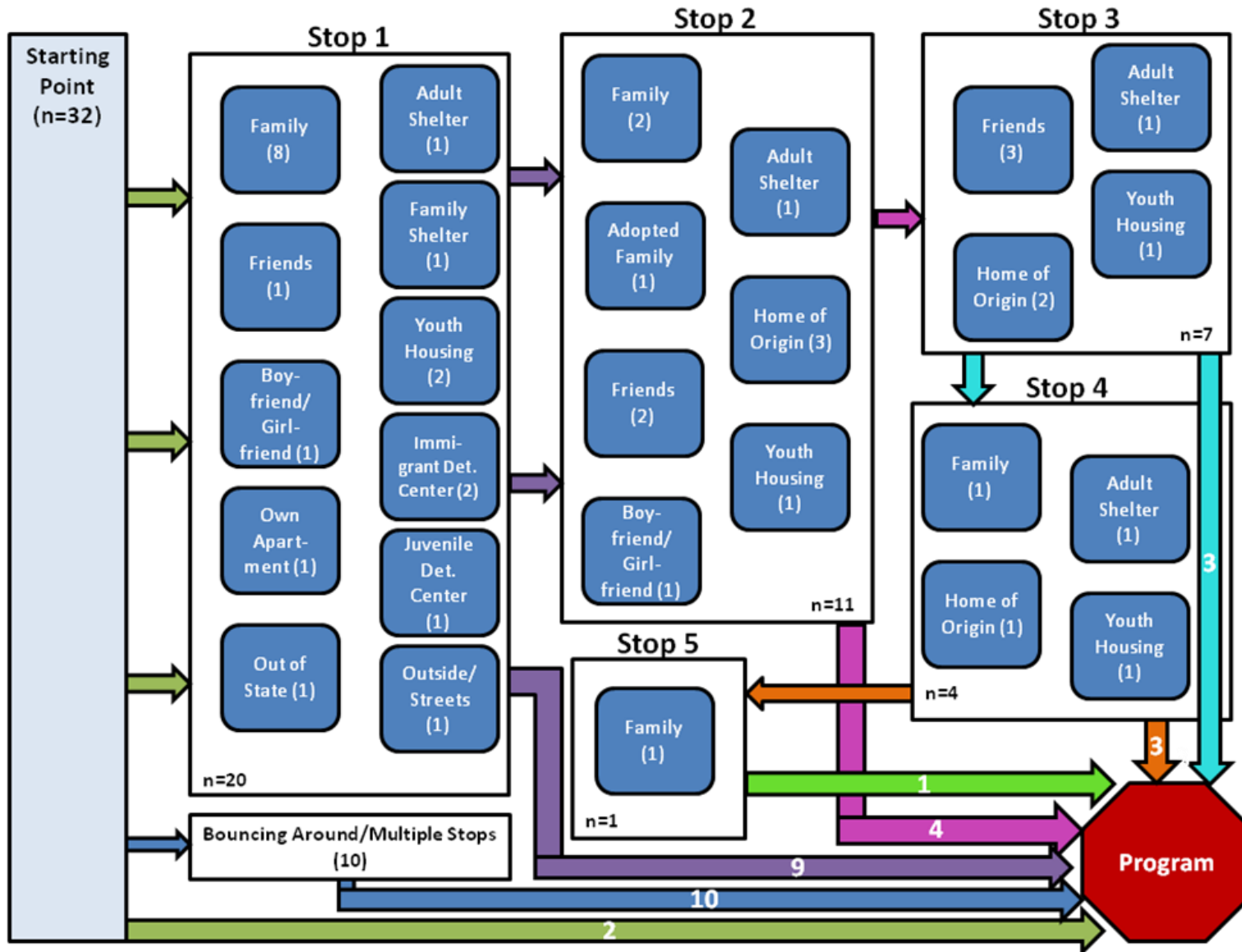
#### Variable Skill Levels

The participants in our study reflect the experiences and perspectives of youth who had the ability to advocate for themselves, which suggests that some homeless youth likely do not possess the skills that are needed to gain entry to some of Chicago’s homeless youth programs. The participants in our study may represent the most-skilled, highest-functioning homeless youth, meaning those who were able to navigate access and the intake process as well as follow program rules once housed. This limitation raises important questions for future research to investigate, such as how many homeless youth are either not seeking out these programs’ services or are unable to finish these programs and why. In other words, how many homeless youth are not being served and why? An additional future research question is what is happening to homeless youth who are not accessing these programs’ services.

#### Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Very few participants talked about issues related to sexuality or gender identity. We do not know if this was because of the reticence of the youth to discuss these issues with the interviewers or because of a lack of youth with these issues in the programs. Other research on youth homelessness shows that these issues are common causes of homelessness. This dissonance raises additional important questions for future research, such as how many youth who identify as LGBTQ are being served currently in Chicago’s homeless youth programs; how is Chicago’s homeless youth system meeting the needs of LGBTQ homeless youth, and how can the system be even more responsive; do LGBTQ homeless youth go to an alternate system for assistance, and, if so, what is this system, and how well is it meeting the needs of LGBTQ homeless youth.

Appendix A: Participants' Paths to Their Current Homeless Youth Programs



The figure on the preceding page depicts general trends in the 22 participants' paths that we were able to plot completely. That is, while it does not show the individual path of each participant, it does show how many participants moved to a variety of housing options during each stop on their paths to their current programs.

Participants' starting points/homes of origin were not always their parents' homes. Some participants described living with older siblings or other family members and becoming homeless when they no longer could stay at these places. Although something prompted them to leave or be removed from their parents' home, that event was not always the beginning of their homelessness or their paths to their current programs.

The figure shows that upon leaving their starting points/homes of origin, participants moved to 11 different types of housing, institutional settings, or places at Stop 1: family members' homes (8 participants), a friend's home (1 participant), a boyfriend's/girlfriend's home (1 participant), own apartment (1 participant), out of state (1 participant), adult shelter (1 participant), family shelter (1 participant), youth housing program (2 participants), immigrant detention centers (2 participants), juvenile detention center (1 participant), outside/on the streets (1 participant). Additionally, two participants moved into their current youth housing programs. From these Stop 1 places, nine participants moved into their current youth housing programs, while 11 participants moved to other types of intermediary settings, as depicted in the Stop 2 box. This progression continues across the figure.

## Appendix B: Methodology to Measure Youth's Ratings of Current Programs

As detailed in CURL's reports on the overall Evaluation of Chicago's Plan to End Homelessness, the longitudinal client survey included a number of scales to assess various aspects of service receipt. To look at service efficacy, we used a four-item scale derived from a larger list of items used in the social service satisfaction questionnaire (Reid & Gundlach, 1983<sup>31</sup>). That questionnaire is designed to capture a larger, more complex concept than efficacy, but the chosen items only focus on efficacy. Here we call the instrument the Service Helpfulness Scale. Each item on the scale is rated from 1 (low) to 5 (high), with higher scores reflecting greater feelings of efficacy. A typical item of that scale is "This program has been very helpful for me." The alpha reliability of the scale for the interviewed youth is .85, while the alpha reliability of the scale for the youth-aged individuals in the adult system is .81.

Two measures were used to capture client ambiance. The central measure, here called the Caring and Service Quality Scale, averages ten, five-point items designed to solicit client perceptions of whether workers care about them. Several items in the scale also tap perceptions about the range of service offerings. All ten items comprised a single factor of a scale originally designed to focus on substance abuse services for homeless clients (Sosin & Durkin, 2007<sup>32</sup>). Items were re-written here for generality. Typical items are "workers in this program care about their clients," and "workers in this program respect their clients." The alpha reliability score of the scale for the interviewed youth is .91, and for the youth-aged individuals in the adult system who completed a client survey, the alpha reliability score is .95.

Another measure concerns ambiance of referrals to other programs. This measure is adopted from a previous study of service coordination (Mares, Greenberg & Rosenheck, 2008<sup>33</sup>). The former measure, called the Service Coordination and Planning Scale (hereafter referred as "usefulness" scale), sums items originally intended to be answered by workers. The measure averages four five-point items. The alpha reliability of the scale for the interviewed youth is .71, while the alpha reliability of the scale for the youth-aged individuals in the adult system who completed a client survey is .89.

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<sup>31</sup> Reid, P.N., & Gundlach, J.H. (1983). A scale for the measurement of client satisfaction in the social services. *Journal of Social Science Research* 7(1):37-54.

<sup>32</sup> Sosin, M.R. & Durkin, E. (2007). Perceptions about services and dropout from a substance abuse case management program. *Journal of Community Psychology* 35(5): 583-602.

<sup>33</sup> Mares, A.S., Greenberg, G.A., & Rosenheck, R.A. (2008). Client-level Measures of Service Integration Among Chronically Homeless Adults. *Community Mental Health Journal*, 44(5): 367-376.

**Appendix C: Program Services Identified by Youth Participants**

<b>Life Skills</b>	<b>Employment Related</b>	<b>Education Related</b>	<b>Housing Related</b>	<b>Material Support</b>	<b>Case Management</b>	<b>Help Obtaining ID</b>	<b>Transportation</b>	<b>Recreation</b>	<b>Health-care</b>	<b>Child-care</b>
Budgeting/monetary management	Job listings, referrals, leads	Financial assistance	Apartment hunting	Shelter/room and board	Link to services	Navigate process	CTA cards	Field trips	On-site services	On-site services
Cooking	Referrals to job fairs	GED help	Savings	Food/groceries	Emotional support	Assist with covering cost	Staff provide rides	Community building activities	Referrals	Referrals
Grocery shopping	Skills-based services (ex. computers)	Help choosing school	Referrals	Clothes	Trust					
House-keeping	Meet employment prerequisites	Help enrolling in school	Aftercare	Hygiene products	Confidentiality					
Health, including sexual health	Job training programs	Encouragement to attend school	Financial assistance	Financial assistance	Honesty					
Laundry	Interview clothes	Motivation while in school	Program extensions							
Relationships	Mock interviews	School advocacy								
Social skills	Resume writing									
Substance abuse prevention										