INTRODUCTION

Youth and young adults (YYA) are defined by a complex and critical stage of personal growth. Unfortunately, these young people experiencing homelessness lack safety, stability and other basic life needs. Moreover, many of these individuals are unable to access systems, services and resources designed to support healthy development. For these reasons, YYA experiencing homelessness require a combination of developmentally-appropriate housing and service options. At the systemic level, this approach depends on close collaboration between government agencies, philanthropists and community-based organizations.

Youth (minors) and young adults (18-24 years old) who experience homelessness span across many demographic groups. Each YYA and their experience is unique, meaning no two situations are exactly alike. Young parent families (both minors and those 18-24) may need help furthering their parenting skills and navigating housing systems while caring for minor children. Minors experiencing family crisis may need counseling, other supportive services and a safe place while housing options are being assessed. Because of the vast array of situations these young people experience, services and housing options in every community must be flexible and well informed.

The criteria below were developed to help communities implement the National Network for Youth's Proposed System to End Youth and Young Adult Homelessness. The Proposed System was developed as a planning guide for communities to identify strengths and gaps in the services they offer to young people experiencing homelessness. Many communities in the nation have never had the benefit of having a runaway and homeless youth service provider receiving funds from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Family & Youth Services Bureau. However, these communities may have long-standing youth service providers or other community-based organizations with experience collaborating with local child welfare agencies, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development housing assistance programs and local education agency liaisons to develop a community response to youth and young adult homelessness.

Until recently, many systems serving homeless populations worked in isolation. Recent efforts have included the development and promotion of interagency efforts to build cohesive systems that can end homelessness for specific populations at the federal, state and local levels. Now is the time to expand our focus on community response to and prevention of homelessness among our nation's young people, and to ensure that any experience of homelessness is rare, brief and nonrecurring. This criteria below has been informed by experts including youth service providers with long records of success serving youth, advocates, and young people with lived experience. These criteria are intended to help a community that implements the Proposed System evaluate whether they have ended homelessness among young people. They represent key elements that a community must have in place in order to fully serve and support this population.

CRITERIA

1. The community has a well thought out and cohesive system in place to provide a range of housing, as well as homelessness prevention, crisis/early intervention, long-term intervention, and aftercare services for all young people experiencing homelessness using the most inclusive and broad, federally recognized definition.
    a. The community has developed a detailed plan identifying services available and resources to fill existing gaps spanning prevention through aftercare services, including potential short and long term housing.
    b. The community's plan is informed by best practices in positive youth development, trauma-informed care, cultural competency, client-centered care, and strengths-based services.
    c. The community's plan includes housing and service options that are voluntary, confidential, free and easy for youth to access themselves; including no-barrier services, which have been demonstrated as an essential first step in reaching the most vulnerable young people who may be running from or avoid engagement with child welfare, criminal justice (including juvenile and adult systems), mental health or other systems.

2. The community has the capacity to provide housing and services to young people through a youth-centric and needs-based approach, that frequently utilizes developmentally appropriate assessments throughout the time a young person is in need, in order to allow that individual to access necessary services when they are ready to interact with them.
    a. The community has multiple designated agencies that share information in order to identify where individual young people fit into their system, and increases flexibility within the systems to allow individuals to enter and exit various programs as needed.
    b. The community has consulted with legal counsel to assess ways for their systems to communicate in compliance with varying federal, state and local confidentiality and private information standards.
    c. The community implements systemic communication and data sharing by way of Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) that identify the agencies and protocols they will use to communicate regarding the most vulnerable youth and young adults, and implements coordinated efforts at the community level to oversee services for this population using an interagency approach.
    d. The community has a Coordinated Access/Assessment site(s) that is designated for youth only. In rural areas where there are no youth agencies, the coordinated system compares youth to youth and adults to adults when determining need, vulnerability, and housing priority.

3. The community has an array of service options available to help prevent homelessness for young people when it is appropriate for them to reunify, reconnect or stay with family, or alternatively transition to independence.

    a. The community has appropriate services available to families in conflict, which offer options the family unit can access in order to keep minors with their families when safe to do so. The services take into consideration, and are tailored to, the individual's family dynamics, and relate to any relevant subpopulation(s).

    b. The community has appropriate supports and services that transition with youth from one program to another (for example, from a transitional living program to a more independent living model).

    c. Systems, including, but not limited to, child welfare and criminal justice, develop transition plans for individuals exiting their care at least 6 months prior to exit date; or longer than 6 months where housing markets demand more planning.

        i. Transition plans are developed specifically to avoid young people exiting to homelessness, and are service intensive to ensure housing stability. Transition planning shall include ensuring young people exit with valid state issued identification for the state which they will be exiting to.

        ii. The community holds child welfare and criminal justice accountable for aftercare of young people exiting their systems for at least a year to ensure housing and other services remain in place.

    d. Local education agencies in communities have established MOUs directly with local youth service providers so that young people are referred to appropriate services and supports.

4. The community has an adequate continuum of housing options which range from emergency to long-term for young people in need of safe, stable, age-appropriate housing, such that no young person is without access to an appropriate bed in their community.

    a. The community works with youth service providers, shelters and local education agencies to count all young people experiencing homelessness using the most inclusive and broad, federally recognized definition.

    b. The community has allocated resources appropriately, based on their accurate counts, to meet the housing needs of these young people moving into safe, stable, and age appropriate housing.

    c. The community offers housing options for young people within their community in order to ensure they are not pushed away from their established support networks. These networks include the resources necessary to achieve independence.

5. The community measures the success of programs serving young people using youth appropriate core outcomes. Supportive services offered during engagement with a program focus on these outcomes as goals after an intervention is provided. These outcomes include: stable housing; permanent connections; education, training & employment; health & social/emotional well-being; and self-sufficiency.

    a. Stable housing: safe, stable & developmentally appropriate housing with access to supportive services as necessary.
    b. Permanent connections: healthy attachments to peers, mentors, family & other caring adults.
    c. Education, training & employment: employability through supported academic success, development of workplace skills & connections to employers.
    d. Health & social/emotional well-being: physical health, ability to create & maintain positive relationships with others, solve problems, experience empathy & manage emotions.
    e. Self-sufficiency is critical for young people learning to be independent. It is the skill set that allows them to fully develop as young adults. Self-sufficiency is self-management including but not limited to finance, cooking, shopping, laundry, transportation, parenting and household management.
    f. All program outcomes measured through performance standards should be reflective of the population they serve. Outcome measures currently being used to assess programs serving adult populations dissuade programs from serving YYA for fear of losing funding since the focus of these programs is distinct and unique.

Criteria and Benchmarks for Achieving the Goal of Ending Youth Homelessness

The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) and its member agencies have adopted a vision of what it means to end all homelessness, ensuring that it is a rare, brief, and non-recurring experience. This vision was included in the 2015 amendment to the federal strategic plan to prevent and end homelessness. This document provides specific criteria and benchmarks for ending unaccompanied youth homelessness, in order to help guide communities as they take action to achieve the goal through a coordinated community response to youth homelessness.

Purpose of the Criteria and Benchmarks

Criteria and benchmarks work together to provide a complete picture and an ongoing assessment of a community's response to homelessness. While the criteria focus on describing essential elements and accomplishments of the community's response, benchmarks serve as important indicators of whether and how effectively that system is working on an ongoing basis. Together, these criteria and benchmarks are intended to help communities drive down the number of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness to as close to zero as possible, while building long-term, lasting solutions that can effectively and efficiently respond to future needs.

Communities that have assessed their response to youth homelessness and concluded that they have met the criteria and benchmarks will have the opportunity to validate and confirm their achievement through a federal review process. During that process, we will consider a community's data and information holistically. For example, it may be possible for data to indicate that a community has achieved all of the benchmarks, while other information may indicate that the expectations of the criteria haven't been met. Or the benchmarks may indicate that a community's response is working efficiently, but it has not been in place long enough to have fully achieved the goal. These tools can help you as you work to achieve the goal and document and validate your community's claim.

Under the benchmarks section, federal partners are continuing to solicit stakeholder input and assess available data to support recommendations for one or more of the proposed indicators. Revised guidance will be posted to the Youth Criteria and Benchmarks webpage on the USICH website. These criteria and benchmarks represent our best thinking at this time. We will continue to review and evaluate their effectiveness as more communities approach and succeed in meeting the goal of ending youth homelessness.

Criteria

USICH and the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Housing and Urban Development have developed the following set of community-level criteria for achieving an end to youth homelessness. These criteria, and the accompanying benchmarks, apply to all youth and young adults under the age of 25 who are unaccompanied by a parent, legal guardian, or caretaker and who meet any federal definition of homelessness.

1. **The community identifies all unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness.**
   The community uses coordinated outreach, in-reach, multiple data sources, and other methods to identify and enumerate all unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness, spanning the community's entire geographical area. Specifically, while recognizing that youth experiencing homelessness may move among a variety of settings:

   a. The community literally identifies every unaccompanied youth who is unsheltered, in shelter, or in transitional housing settings or other residential programs for youth experiencing homelessness; and,

   b. The community coordinates a comprehensive set of strategies, spanning schools, the child welfare system, including child protective services, the justice system, drop-in centers, hotlines and 2-1-1, and other youth-serving agencies and programs to identify unaccompanied youth who are doubled up or couch-surfing and considered homeless under any federal definition.

   The community's efforts are tailored to the unique needs of particularly vulnerable youth.

2. **The community uses prevention and diversion strategies whenever possible, and otherwise provides immediate access to low-barrier crisis housing and services to any youth who needs and wants it.**
   The community helps youth avoid the need for emergency shelter whenever possible by connecting and/or reunifying them with members of their family or other natural supports (as defined by each young person), providing support to the youth's identified family to help them stay at or return home, or through other prevention or diversion strategies. Youth and young adults who are unsheltered, fleeing an unsafe situation, or experiencing a housing crisis, can immediately access developmentally appropriate safety services, emergency shelters, host homes, or other temporary housing settings, as well as other forms of emergency assistance. Access to shelter or other temporary housing in the community includes an adequate supply and range of options that are not contingent on school attendance, sobriety, minimum income requirements, absence of a criminal record, or other unnecessary conditions, including options appropriate for particularly vulnerable youth.

3. **The community uses coordinated entry processes to effectively link all youth experiencing homelessness to housing and services solutions that are tailored to their needs.**
   The community implements coordinated entry processes that include the full array of youth-serving systems and programs and uses assessment tools that are adapted for youth and appropriate for their circumstances. The provision of tailored housing and services solutions is driven by youth choice and includes a range of options, including: service-only interventions, such as family reunification; housing options with varying levels of services, such as transitional living programs, host homes, rapid re-housing, permanent supportive housing; and, other affordable, safe, and stable living situations. Youth have the right to refuse housing and/or services. Coordinated entry processes, housing options, and services are trauma-informed, age and developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive, provide fair and equitable access, reflect a positive youth development framework, and support the capacity of youth to achieve four core outcomes: stable housing, permanent connections, education and employment, and well-being.

4. **The community acts with urgency to swiftly assist youth to move into permanent or non-time-limited housing options with appropriate services and supports.**
   Using Housing First and low-barrier approaches that ensure youth safety (as defined by each youth), the community efficiently connects youth experiencing homelessness to permanent or non-time-limited housing

and services opportunities to prevent future entries into homelessness. Time-limited housing and services programs also support youth to achieve safe and appropriate exits upon discharge. Youth may choose to first enter time-limited safe and stable housing options, such as transitional living programs, before securing a permanent or non-time-limited housing opportunity. This includes youth in unsafe situations, such as those fleeing domestic violence, dating violence, sexual violence, or trafficking, or those with other significant risk factors or vulnerabilities. It is the expectation that these programs, like all programs, demonstrate strong outcomes related to exits to permanent housing.

5. **The community has resources, plans, and system capacity in place to continue to prevent and quickly end future experiences of homelessness among youth.**
   The community dedicates sufficient resources to continue to prevent and end youth homelessness scaled to projected needs, and acts with urgency to end youth homelessness. The community has comprehensive plans and partnerships in place and system capacity to continue to: 1) whenever possible, prevent or divert youth from experiencing homelessness through substantial partnership with schools (including post-secondary educational institutions), the child welfare and justice systems, employment, physical and mental health, and other youth-serving programs; 2) connect youth experiencing homelessness to appropriate and choice-driven crisis housing and services options; 3) connect pregnant and parenting youth to Head Start and child care centers; and 4) swiftly move youth into permanent or non-time-limited housing options with the appropriate services and supports.

Benchmarks

Communities should use a variety of information and data to assess whether they have achieved an end to youth homelessness, including the data necessary to calculate the following benchmarks, which, like the criteria, will continue to be refined over time. These tools and guidance can help with that assessment. Taken together, that information and data indicate how well a community's coordinated response is working to ensure that homelessness among unaccompanied youth is rare, brief, and non-recurring. Communities will also have the opportunity to document any special circumstances in their local context that should be considered during the review process.

These benchmarks provide important indicators of whether and how effectively a community's response to youth homelessness is working, but this is not the only data or information we will review as part of the federal confirmation process. Meeting the benchmarks does not guarantee that a community will be confirmed as achieving the goal of ending youth homelessness if other supplemental data or information related to the criteria above indicates that the goal has not yet been met.

   A. **There are few youth experiencing homelessness at any given time.**

      1. The community's census of youth experiencing homelessness includes all unaccompanied youth under 25 identified by local education agencies or other agencies that meet any federal definition of homelessness.

      2. No unaccompanied youth under 18 are experiencing unsheltered homelessness.

      3. No unaccompanied youth ages 18-24 are experiencing unsheltered homelessness, with the rare exception of someone who has been identified and offered low-barrier crisis housing and services, but who has not yet accepted assistance. The community continues to outreach to youth

experiencing unsheltered homelessness that have not yet accepted crisis housing and services, and continues to offer assistance at least once per week.

4. No unaccompanied youth seeking basic center services or emergency shelter are turned away unless they can be successfully diverted to another safe, temporary living environment of their choosing.

5. All youth identified as experiencing homelessness, including those who are sheltered or doubled up, are offered connections to appropriate housing or services.

NOTE:

- Federal partners are also considering an indicator that expresses the maximum number of unaccompanied youth ages 18-24 who may be identified as experiencing homelessness in a community at any point in time.

B. Youth experiencing homelessness are swiftly connected to safe and stable housing opportunities and to permanent housing options.

Federal partners are in the process of developing relevant indicators for this benchmark, focused on assuring rapid exits from homelessness to permanent housing, while also recognizing that some youth may choose to enter time-limited safe and stable housing programs or access other residential placements prior to accessing a permanent housing opportunity. Based on input to date from stakeholders and key partners, we are considering indicators that express the following:

1. For youth under 18:

   a. The length of time in shelter before reunification or placement into permanent housing, transitional housing, or other safe and stable housing.

2. For youth ages 18-24:

   a. The length of time in shelter before placement into permanent housing or transitional housing.

NOTE:

- Federal partners are also considering how to incorporate expectations regarding exits from transitional housing and transitional living programs within this benchmark.