

NW Michigan and the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program: Working with Education Partners in Rural Communities to Serve Youth Experiencing Homelessness



Background

In January 2017, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) announced the ten HUD-funded [Continuums of Care \(CoC\)](#) that were selected to be part of Round 1 of the [Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program \(YHDP\)](#), including four rural communities: Anchorage, AK; Grand Traverse, Antrim, Leelanau, Kalkasa, and Benzie Counties (MI); and Kentucky and Ohio Balance of State CoCs.

YHDP communities are charged with developing a Coordinated Community Plan (CCP) to prevent and end youth and young adult (YYA) homelessness that engages stakeholders from a myriad of systems, including housing, education, employment, child welfare, juvenile justice, and behavioral health. Rural YHDP sites, especially those with BoS projects and multiple school districts or LEAs, face unique challenges with involving educational partners as well as ensuring youth and young adults (YYAs) experiencing homelessness are connected to or remained engaged in educational services. Nevertheless, many rural YHDPs have developed practical and creative approaches to engage stakeholders and make the best use of resources available across their geographic regions. The YHDP in Northwest Michigan offers strategies for integrating LEAs and service providers into an interagency partnership¹ that provides services for YYAs experiencing homelessness in the five-county geographic area covered by the YHDP.

Challenges with Serving Youth Experiencing Homelessness in Rural YHDP Sites

NCHE-hosted interviews and focus groups with Round One YHDP sites in 2018, which included representation from the Northwest Michigan YHDP, addressed questions focused specifically on serving youth experiencing homelessness in rural areas. Several challenges were identified, including the following:

- Housing and other resources are limited and often spread out in rural areas, creating access problems especially for YYAs. Transportation is a significant barrier for many of the youth, and most do not want to seek services far from where they are living. Most rural areas do not have shelters or crisis housing options for youth experiencing homelessness.
- Most service models and best practices are designed for urban areas and are not adaptable to rural settings. Models for urban areas are generally based on services that are available in a concentrated area and accessible by public transportation.
- While face-to-face meetings in rural communities may be preferred over virtual meetings or conference calls, LEA homeless liaisons, interagency partners, and Youth Advisory Board (YAB) members are often unable to travel long distances for meetings and not always able to commit the time needed away from their jobs to participate in YHDP-related activities.
- There are often multiple LEAs within the geographic area covered by a YHDP region, but in some projects

¹ Key interagency partners include the Northwest Community Action Agency, Goodwill Industries, Child and Family Services of Northwest Michigan/Third Level Youth Services, Students in Transition Empowerment Program, Department of Health and Human Services-Foster Youth Program, and Workforce Development. The Coordinated Community Plan lists additional agencies as well.

only one or two LEA homeless liaisons are involved, and there is only minimal communication with other LEAs.

- The more LEAs or communities that fall under the YHDP region, the more inconsistency there is in protocols, policies, and service delivery for YYAs experiencing homelessness.

Addressing Challenges in Rural YHDP Sites: Strategies for Successful Education Partnerships

NCHE interviews and focus groups in 2018 with Round One YHDP sites, interagency partners, and lead education liaisons included those in rural YHDP sites, including Northwest Michigan identified strategies in response to the challenges noted above. Strategies for successfully partnering with education and other stakeholders specifically for rural sites included the following:

- Map all resources that would benefit YYAs, such as housing, health, education, workforce development, across the region and provide this information to LEAs and community agencies in each community. Inviting input from LEAs and community agencies would ensure a more comprehensive resource and engage stakeholders early in the project.
- Build in travel time and resources for YHDP lead agency staff in rural areas to learn about and meet the players in each of the communities covered by the YHDP.
- Establish relationships with LEA homeless liaisons from each of the LEAs in the YHDP region to help them understand the purpose of the YHDP and identify ways they can actively participate in and contribute to implementation of YHDP. For example, ask to be put on the agenda of existing meetings in the LEAs. Relationship building should be a collaborative responsibility of both the CoC and the lead education liaison, especially if LEAs were not involved early on in the planning of the YHDP.
- Provide YHDP engagement opportunities (e.g., trainings, meetings, YouthCount, Hunger and Homeless Week) for LEAs. Track school systems that participated in these engagement opportunities in order to target needed follow up to those who did not participate.
- Develop consistent processes for identification, referral, assessment, and service delivery for YYAs among all LEAs and interagency partners across the region.
- Create regional groups that convene education stakeholders (e.g., local homeless liaisons, school counselors, school social workers, school superintendents, higher education stakeholders) and interagency partners (e.g., housing, social services, health, workforce development providers) so that stakeholders do not have to travel great distances to participate in an interagency approach to creating access to supports and service delivery for YYAs. Include the heads of agencies and service providers so that they can reinforce the importance of working together. If there is buy-in from the directors, the message will reach other staff and increase their engagement. Maintain communication across all the regional groups.
- Consider options to develop alternative housing models for youth, such as host homes or shared housing, in areas with limited housing options for YYAs experiencing homelessness.

YHDP Round One Profile: Northwest Michigan

The Region



The YHDP site in Northwest Michigan encompasses Grand Traverse, Leelanau, Antrim, Benzie and Kalkaska counties (shaded at left). Within this nearly 2,200 square-mile geographic expanse, over 170,000 people reside. Primarily a rural area, Grand Traverse is the most populated county in the region and is in the center of the YHDP service area, with Leelanau and Antrim counties to the north and bordered by Benzie and Kalkaska to the west and east, respectively. The rural geography borders Lake Michigan and is sprinkled with natural water features. Poverty levels range from 8.1% in Leelanau County to 15.3% in Kalkaska. The site—one of four rural communities in Round One—was awarded \$1.3 million through the YHDP. During the 2016-17 school year, LEAs in the Northwest Michigan YHDP site identified a total of 1,114 students experiencing homelessness (including 242 unaccompanied youth) out of a total student enrollment across all LEAs of 22,425.

	Antrim	Kalkaska	Grand Traverse	Leelanau	Benzie
Population estimates (July 1, 2018)	23,365	17,824	95,573	21,764	17,753
Persons in poverty (%)	11.1%	17.1%	9.3%	7.1%	9.4%

Source: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/map/US/PST045216#viewtop>.

Northwest Michigan YHDP Strategies for Success with Education Partners

One of the most important features of the Northwest Michigan YHDP's strong interagency partnerships, which include schools and school districts, was the early, ongoing, and essential involvement of education stakeholders.

- The lead education liaison is the McKinney-Vento grants coordinator for the Students in Transition Empowerment Program (STEP), which includes the five counties in the YHDP and 20 LEAs. STEP is included in the YHDP Coordinated Community Plan as a key partner. Leadership in both the LEAs and the Homeless Youth Initiative enables the lead education liaison to connect two very different systems for youth and to create awareness and engagement among all partners. She is knowledgeable about the LEAs and communities in the project and has been willing to travel to the outer-most areas to engage school personnel and other stakeholders.
- The lead education liaison was involved in the YHDP from the beginning. She chaired the Homeless

Youth Initiative, which was a local initiative of the CoC prior to the YHDP. The Homeless Youth Initiative convened community members and youth-serving agencies to address the needs of youth experiencing homelessness. The lead education liaison helped write the YHDP grant proposal and Coordinated Community Plan. Her early involvement meant that education was already integrated into the site planning, and education was easy to leverage as the project progressed. The Coordinated Community Plan defines a key role for schools and LEAs to assist with assessment of and referrals for youth still in school who experience homelessness as well as for those who have left school but feel safe in returning to school in times of need.

- In the YHDP's mapping initiative, the lead education liaison was instrumental in providing information on the role of schools in the broad picture of homeless services for YYAs and in reinforcing education as a critical partner in preventing and ending youth homelessness. The mapping initiative determined for what services youth providers were accountable and how referrals should take place. The mapping helped each partner organization, including schools, to understand and agree upon their responsibilities, as well as know whom to contact for what purposes.
- The lead education liaison was instrumental in creating the YAB as a subcommittee of the Homeless Youth Initiative. She reached out to students who had experienced homelessness to invite their participation on the YAB, and she acts as the YAB advisor.
- The Michigan State Coordinator for the EHCY program has been and remains actively involved and supportive of the Northwest Michigan site and holds LEAs in the region accountable for implementing the YHDP plan. The State Coordinator has attended YHDP planning meetings and is always available to support the lead education liaison, whether it be with brainstorming, information provision, advocacy at the state level, or contacting local superintendents to encourage their participation in YHDP.